

All Saints' Day. November 6, 2016. Luke 6:20-31.

(With apologies to Sox fans . . .) I didn't plan to watch the Cubs' victory parade on Friday—I actually *planned* to spend most of the day writing this sermon. But I was visiting with a parishioner in their home, and this person just happened to have the parade on the tv. What struck me most wasn't the throngs of people lining the streets. I think we all knew that the crowd would be huge. What struck me most was just how many trolleys and busses there were in the parade. If they had wanted to, they could have fit the whole World Series roster on one open top bus, which would have made for a rather short parade, but would have worked. But they didn't want to. They didn't want to squeeze all the stars in together but also they didn't want to restrict the parade to just the stars. In the end, the parade had around fifty vehicles in it.

Of course, it didn't get my blood pumping to see all the non-athletic VIPs and millionaires on the politicians', owners', and corporate partners' floats. But it was cool to see the trolleys that went first, loaded with family members and totally anonymous employees who never left the background but were essential to the ball team working well this year. Trolleys crammed with scouts, secretaries, equipment managers, grounds crew members, office staff. The essential members of the organization of whom none of us have ever heard. We all know Russell and Rizzo and Bryant and Arrieta and Lester. Some of us even remember Hector Rondon. But at the big party, they also included Sally from accounting and Jim from facilities and Jamie the assistant to the assistant to Theo Epstein's assistant. And then it hit me: those trolleys are All Saints Day.

Because of course we know the big ones: Saints Peter, Paul, and Mary; Saints Francis, Theresa, George, and Christopher. But the wisdom of All Saints' Day presses upon us that it has taken an awful lot of holy utility players, office staff, and grounds crew to get the church here today. On this day we load up the trolleys with all the obscure, forgotten, hard to pronounce weirdos who have in their historically quiet way kept the name "Jesus" in the ears of the world.

Oh look, it's Iwig of Lindisfarne and Herve the Bard, Erconwald of London, Simon Stylites, and Athwulf of Thorney. And on this day we add our own not quite canonical saints, the people who formed us, who gave us our first glimpses of the beauty of friendship with God. For me, these are St. Roy of Griffin, Saints Judy, Dana, and Wesley of Powder Springs, St. Brad of Augusta, and St. Ted of Chicago.

And on this day when we pile up the ones who have gone down the path before us, showing us the way, it's impossible to miss a somewhat uncomfortable truth: not all of them are entirely reputable. When you dig a little deeper into the more obscure saints, you often find that some of them led pretty colorful, rough and tumble lives. Some of them, in fact, might look more at home on a wanted poster than on an icon.

Our gospel reading can help us wrap our minds around this. This reading should sound both familiar and strange. It is Luke's version of the Beatitudes, which we might consider a recipe or job qualifications for sainthood. But there are some important differences from Matthew's more famous version. Matthew's gospel famously puts the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. Luke also has Jesus climb a mountain earlier in this chapter, but he goes up there alone, spends the night in prayer, and then comes down and picks twelve apostles from among the big crowd of disciples. Then, just before our reading from this morning begins, he goes with the twelve apostles down the rest of the

mountain to where a great crowd has gathered. Luke tells us that “they had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.” And in the next verse, Jesus starts telling them how they are blessed.

We read this passage today because the Beatitudes are the job qualifications for sainthood; but if this is so then we have some surprises in both context and content. First, the context. In Luke, people don’t follow Jesus up a spiritual mountainside, climbing the ascetical heights to blessed holiness. They come as far as they can, to a “level place,” and Jesus comes down from the mountain to them. And the people don’t come to display their completed piety—they come because they are in need. They come sick and tired and imperfect and dirty, or as Jesus describes them: poor, hungry, weeping; hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed. And Jesus sees this imperfect mass of people and tells them “you are the blessed ones,” you are the ones with God in your midst, you are beloved children of God.

At first it isn’t exactly what we want to hear. Part of the point of saints is that they are exemplars for us, and we’d prefer that they look like those people we look up to—if they could all be as gorgeous, talented, and rich as Kris Bryant, that would be great. But the economy of God’s blessings takes no account of the world’s economy of merit. God blesses us not because we deserve it, but because we need it. And in a way the obscurity and disreputability of many saints, the unimpressive nature of the crowd in Luke’s gospel, is deeply hopeful for us. Because if they are blessed saints of God, then we can be too. We, with our imperfections, needs, hunger, foibles, and failures. According to Luke, sainthood isn’t something achieved by the righteous, but something that comes to the needy. Something that comes even to us.

I’ll just close with the end of the gospel passage. If the Beatitudes are like the qualifications the ideal candidate for the position of saint will have, then this final paragraph is the job description. We are the blessed, beloved people of God, as were so many imperfect needy people before us. We’ve got the job, because God’s blessings come in response to our needs, not our merits. With this blessing, we’re called to be God’s beloved saints. And here is what the job is: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

It isn’t an easy job. In fact, only a saint could do it. Amen.