

All Saints Day. November 1, 2020. Matthew 5:1-12.

All Saints Day is actually not built for mourning. It is a joyful feast, celebrating the triumph of those, before us, who have gone through the great ordeal and now enjoy everlasting blessedness. It is supposed to be a party, reminding us of all those who have pointed us with their lives toward God. And, honestly, it's not supposed to be about our private saints, the grandmothers and friends and parents who have taught us how to hope and love. It's more about public saints, however public that is: Francis or Dominic or Thomas, but also Gummarus and Athwulf and Guthlac of Crowland.

Then on All Saints Day, the Beatitudes are made to look like an ethical to do list for sainthood. Do these things, and you, too, can be a saint. Step one, be poor in spirit. Step two, mourn. And so on. This isn't actually what the Beatitudes are. They are not moral injunctions—they are performative, efficacious statements of blessing. Jesus is declaring these people blessed, like a Star Trekian “make it so.” He says it and it is so. And so the Beatitudes today are less a to do list than a census. The saints are blessed: the ones who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Let us be inspired by the saints, let us even become saints. But what makes saints is first not human effort, but the blessing of God.

All Saints is celebrating and remembering this; All Souls, which is officially tomorrow, is the time when we take care over our own dead and all the normal people of God who have died. But we are combining them today because we need to mourn. This most terrible of years has taken so much from us. And it has taken so many people from us: friends and relatives and, too, those neighbors we did not know, whose deaths have still lessened us all. Many of us have had deaths this year that were not from the pandemic, but the pandemic prevented us from mourning. We need to mourn.

Jesus blesses those who mourn, and it's a good thing he does because every message we receive from our culture tells us not to mourn. We are set up to be too busy to mourn. Mourning, lament, is a radical act because it takes us right out of our most controlling ethos: the consumerist market that only acknowledges those shallow needs that it creates and addresses with the newest thing to buy. To mourn is to take seriously needs we have that come from the depths of our God-given humanity, and cannot be addressed by material goods. It is a hard and holy act that re-centers our being in the way we are created, instead of how we are formed by the docetic demands of the market. We are social beings, made to love. And when the beloved is gone, the fabric of the world and of ourselves is torn. To mourn is to acknowledge that the re-stitching of the world and our souls takes time.

We might also be told that the stakes are too high to mourn. Aside from the market, daily life these days takes about all the grit and hope we can scrape together. And I imagine that I am not alone in thinking that if I pause for lament, if I let the grief catch up to me, it just might overwhelm me. And here we are two days out from a momentous election, when it feels like very basic things about the kind of society we will live in is being decided. How can we stop to mourn, when there is so much work to do, and so much on the line?

First, the world we hope to build is a world where it is easier to be fully human. There are always busy times, but a movement with no room for lament is a movement that reduces us to less than God created us to be. And second, there are some truths that can only be known through mourning. There are some things that can only be understood by grieving them. The only way to understand a beloved parent's death is to mourn it. The only way to grasp a million global deaths is lament. Any other response is a misunderstanding. To understand this year, to understand our lives, to move forward into a different world truthfully, we must mourn.

And so we mourn because we love. We love because love is what we are created for, the truthful heart of our lives. But we do not mourn without hope. Christian lament is, paradoxically, always rooted in hope, because God in Jesus Christ went to the bottom of human existence and planted hope even there. Our hope is rooted in the resurrection, in God's great triumph over death, whose effects are enjoyed already by the saints. We hope in our grief that our lives will, in time, be stitched back together—different, but whole. We hope in our lament for a better world, where we don't have to fight so hard to be able to care for each other. And of course in that hopeful lament, the resolve to join in building such a world is born. In our mourning, we are blessed because we will be comforted. Loving and mourning, we can live truthfully and with hope, because we have been promised that we will be comforted, we have been assured that we are blessed. Amen.