

# Homily for the Solemnity of All Saints

November 1, 2020

Readings: Revelations 7:2-4, 9-14; 1 John 3: 1-3; Matthew 5: 1-12A

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By the time I attended Corpus Christi School in the 1980s, it was struggling to survive. Such struggling was not new to me. One of seven kids in a single-parent family, I spent my childhood in some of the most troubled spaces in western New York, including a farm town in Orleans County, the Tonawanda Reservation near Buffalo, and a dead-end street near Goodman Plaza on Rochester's northeast side.

The two assignments I remember most from my Corpus Christi days were 1) to observe, categorize and record the types of clouds for several weeks, and 2) to memorize the Beatitudes, which come to us in today's gospel reading. While Matthew's version of the Beatitudes begins with Jesus blessing "the poor in spirit," the version we learned simply blessed the poor—or perhaps it only seemed that way because the word "poor" was such a thorn to me then that it overshadowed any sentence in which it appeared.

Whether our plaid uniform vests were hand-me-downs or new from the packet, most students at Corpus Christi were poor. Some had two parents and a car in their driveway, but these were increasingly rare. We were Puerto Rican, Black and White, but, no matter our skin color, we had an aching awareness that, in a culture where success was measured by an ability to buy things, we fell short. Perhaps that's why we leaned into the Beatitudes.

I can still see the words on the blackboard: *Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek...Blessed are those who are persecuted...* We didn't grasp what Jesus meant exactly but recognized something wild in his words, which valued the exact opposite of what everyone else valued and elevated what was often overlooked, derided or despised. The Beatitudes turned the world on its head and shook some part of us loose. A group of ragtag kids, used to invisibility, suddenly felt "seen."

While the Beatitudes made me feel seen, the cloud assignment taught me to see. If the clouds were piled and cottony, I took out my pencil and jotted "cumulus" on the page. If they stretched across the sky in elegant wisps, I wrote "cirrus." I did not judge whether the clouds were good or bad, I only studied their shape and recorded what I saw. The cloud journal wasn't intended to be a spiritual exercise but that's what it became. The poet Mary Oliver writes that attention is devotion. We bless, she suggests, by truly seeing—by extending our gaze. In today's reading, Jesus asks us to extend our gaze.

His series of blessings require that we adjust the scope of our vision to truly see those on the periphery. They also demand that we reconsider what it means to be successful or "blessed." Whether Jesus exalts the grieving, the persecuted, or those who hunger for justice—the common denominator is humility. Pain, grief and alienation aren't welcome or easy experiences

but they can open us like nothing else. This openness is the blessing. Why? Because when we're full of ourselves, there's no room for God.

As I write these words, we're on the cusp of a presidential election with a global pandemic still in full force. The ongoing and divisive rhetoric has reached a fever pitch. We seem to have lost the ability to empathize with those outside of our ideological and geographical comfort zones. After the last presidential election, marriages and families fell apart. Somewhere along the line, we traded in the soul-saving virtue of humility for judgment and alienation. Today's reading offers nothing less than the way out of this mess. But what does meekness look like in an era of Facebook and Twitter? Where are the opportunities for greater humility in our lives? Where do we refuse to see others? What would it cost to try?

As a kid, I appreciated the Beatitudes' striking reversal of a system of values that placed my people on the bottom tier. Revisiting the passage all these years later, I find the message even more far-reaching and dynamic. *Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the clean in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers.* This is the Gospel of Sweet Humility. The Gospel of the Open Hand. The Gospel of Extending Our Gaze.

On the same weekend we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, we're invited into the life changing work of looking beyond the perimeters of our lives. It is in this simple but radical act of truly seeing each other that we bless and are blessed.