

Sermon for Sunday, November 5, 2023

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

“Present to the Pain”

Reverend Amy Zalk Larson

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read scripture for the day.](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

These words, often called the beatitudes from the Latin word for blessing, are incredibly counter-cultural. Australian pastor and poet Nathan Nettleton says, “If we were to write the beatitudes that we seem to be living by, they would sound something more like this:

Blessed are the comforters, those who distract us or medicate us or entertain us into a state of blissful numbness so we can avoid mourning and pain, for they will turn a huge profit.

Blessed are those who compulsively and excessively satisfy their every hunger and thirst, for they will keep the economy ticking along very nicely, thank you.

Blessed are those who take mercy for themselves, but who in the face of anyone else’s wrongdoing, argue that we must be tough and make an example of transgressors — for they will always be ahead in the opinion polls.”

One thing that distinguishes those beatitudes from those of Jesus is how we’re invited to engage the painful realities of life. Our culture encourages us to do all we can to avoid pain: eat, drink, spend, escape. Steer clear of people who make you feel uncomfortable. Avoid conflict. Turn that frown upside down. It could be said, “Blessed are those who don’t have to deal with pain for they will live the good life.”

Yet, Jesus calls blessed those who are hurting, long suffering, passionate for righteousness, striving for peace, and persecuted for doing the right thing. These types of people all have one thing in common. They are identified by pain - by their own pain or by their engagement with the world’s pain. They’re not the well-off, the wealthy, the lucky, but rather those marked by pain. And Jesus says they are blessed. Jesus directs our attention to the places of deep need and struggle, to those wrestling with it all. He says look, notice. God blesses, honors, esteems, and sees those who are in pain.

God has chosen to be identified with the pain of the world. This is radical. Often, we think pain means we’ve been abandoned by God. People and places scarred by pain are often described as godforsaken. When things are going well, we think God has blessed us; when things fall apart, we often don’t know what to think about God. In the beatitudes, Jesus teaches that God has chosen to bless and to be with those who face suffering, that **God** has chosen to be **in** pain. Jesus teaches this and then demonstrates this by his death on the cross.

In the cross we see that God has entered the pain of the world. God has chosen not to avoid or minimize suffering, but to fully engage it for the healing of all creation. God is so very present amidst

suffering - in the hospital room, funeral home, war zone, refugee camp, detention center. Many of us have found that to be true in our own lives. We've known God's presence most fully in times of grief or when we're walking with people who are in need. We've cried out, "Where are you God", and find, in time, that God is right there with us. God is in the pain working healing and new life. We can't always feel it, but God is there. God's presence is the blessing we all need; it is the blessing we are given in Christ Jesus.

When we see that God is *in* pain, this gives us an important way to view and engage the world. Rather than seeing the needs of our neighbors as a nuisance or something to be pitied, we can recognize that need is a place to meet God and join God. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by all the hurt in our world, we can trust that God is at work in the suffering, and that God gives us what we need to join that work. Rather than offering charity because we're so blessed and should give to those less fortunate, we can be present with people in need, yearning together for the blessing of God's healing presence.

This is how we become pure in heart, merciful peacemakers who hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is how we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. This is how we live as God's people together - by entering into the pain of the world. Being present is the most important thing we can do for those who are suffering. It's how we offer a blessing to them, how we help make God's blessing to them known. We can't be physically present with the people of Gaza and Israel right now. Yet through our ELCA, we participate in a ministry of accompaniment, being present in this place of generational trauma.

Our Peace Not Walls campaign connects ELCA members to our companions in the Holy Land and promotes dignity, full respect for human rights, healing and reconciliation. With our Palestinian Lutheran partners, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, we accompany Palestinians and Israelis, Jews, Christians and Muslims working together for peace with justice. The Peace Not Walls campaign is providing regular updates and steps we can take to accompany God's people in this time. We can keep our hearts open, we can pray, we can advocate as you have the opportunity to do today during the Fellowship Hour.

It is brutally hard to be in pain, to witness pain, yet God is *in* pain.
God is present with us in all the suffering of the world. God is present with us today.

God's presence empowers us to stay present to the painful realities of this world, to move through pain, to heal, to be a healing presence for others.

God's presence brings joy and hope for you, for us, in all things.

Let's join in silent prayer and reflection.