

November 5, 2017 – Matthew 5:1-12 & Revelation 7:9-17

Confessional Lutherans get accused of a lot of things. And often for good reason. We get accused of being stuffy and over-educated. Of spending too much time worrying about doctrine and not enough time caring for our neighbor. Of being inaccessible to those who are just being introduced to Christianity for the first time. There's some truth to all of these. We definitely have our weaknesses.

However, there's one accusation we get that may not be fair. Which is that Lutherans are morbid. That we spend far too much time talking about death.

Now, it's true, we do talk about death a lot. We talk about how death came into the world through the sin of Adam and Eve. About the death of the firstborn in the Passover. About the death of sacrificial animals in the Old Testament. About the death of Jesus on the cross to pay for our sin. About our own death in punishment for sin. And about the death of this whole sinful world on the last day.

That is a lot of death. But I disagree that we talk about it too much. Saying that Lutherans talk about death too much is no different than saying that the Bible talks about death too much. It's right there in scripture. We're just echoing a subject that God's Word discusses over and over again.

Maybe the bigger issue is that we don't talk about life as much as we talk about death. Because that's really what All Saints Day is about. All Saints Day gets a reputation for being a day about death. A day when we remember believers who have died in the faith. It's the reason why All Hallows Eve developed into a holiday that celebrates symbols of death.

But All Saints Day isn't about death. It's about life. Or, more specifically, about the way that Jesus can take the worst things in our lives, even death, and turn them into the best things, even life.

We see that in our Gospel lesson. We call these the Beatitudes, which is just Latin for "blessings." Jesus said them as part of his Sermon on the Mount right at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus is really just introducing himself to these people.

And they probably thought he was nuts. "Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart... Blessed are the peacemakers... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake... Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

Nothing in this list sounds like a blessing. Poverty and grief and weakness and persecution are certainly not blessings. And the rest may be good, but they really don't get you anywhere in a sinful world. Hungering for righteousness doesn't put food on the table. Mercy doesn't pay the bills. Purity of heart doesn't make others less evil. People who try to make peace are often the first ones hurt.

If I were one of the crowd, sitting there, listening to Jesus for the first time, I would say, "That's a great sentiment Jesus. But it doesn't work. You can't tell me I lack something important, and then say it's a blessing that I don't have it. Blessings are when you are given something good. Not when something good is taken from you."

What they didn't realize, what they couldn't realize, is that Jesus would spend the rest of his ministry showing them how he could take the things they lacked and turn them into blessings.

He did it when he called Peter to be his disciple. They thought they lacked fish. That the night was over and they wouldn't be able to catch anymore.

But Jesus took those empty boats and he turned them into a blessing. A greater catch of fish than their boat could even hold.

He did it at the wedding at Cana. They thought they lacked wine. That all they had were jugs of plain water. There are some things that never change. And one of them is that people don't want to drink water at a wedding reception.

But Jesus took that water and he turned it into a blessing. He turned it into more wine than they could drink at a hundred wedding receptions.

He did at the feeding of the 5,000. They thought they lacked food. That all they had were 5 loaves and two fish. A small boys meal. Not even enough food to feed one grown man.

But Jesus took that small meal of bread and fish and he turned it into a blessing. He turned it into enough food to feed every man, woman, and child there. Even the disciples who had said there wasn't enough.

He did it with the disciples themselves. Fishermen and tax collectors and criminals. Men who knew nothing about God's Word. Men who would run at the first sign of trouble. Who would deny that they even knew their Lord.

But Jesus took those simple men and he turned them into a blessing. Into apostles who would share the Gospel to all the world. Even in the face of persecution.

And he does it still with the water of baptism and the bread and wine of communion. Ordinary elements, without anything special about them.

But Jesus takes them and he turns them into a blessing. Into water than can cleanse the soul. Into flesh and blood that can forgive sins, unify divisive people, and strengthen us for work in his kingdom.

Jesus takes what we lack and he turns it into a blessing. Over and over and over again he does it. His entire ministry on earth is one long string of turning poverty into plenty. Meekness into greatness.

Until the very day of his crucifixion. When he takes his own death and turns it into life. Into life for all the world. For you and for me and for everyone we've ever loved who has died in the Lord.

And he continues doing it to this day. Because that grief you feel for someone you've lost. It's a hole. A void. An absence. You lack this person in your home, in your life, in your heart. Grief is an emptiness. That we can't ever fill.

But Jesus can. And does. He fills it with hope. Hope in his resurrection. Hope in him. Hope in the day that St John describes in the revelation.

The day when all those who died in the Lord stand before him. And they lack nothing. They don't lack for food, for they shall hunger no more. They don't lack for water, for neither shall they thirst. They don't lack for shade or rest, for the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.

They don't lack for God himself. For he stands in the midst of them as their shepherd. Guiding them to springs of living water. And wiping away every tear from their eyes.

That is our hope and our life and it is what fills us even when we feel so completely empty with grief or sadness or pain or fear. It is the hope that Jesus poured out his life into us. That we might be full. And lack for nothing.

We call today All Saints Day. But that's actually not really its real name. It's formal name is the Feast of All Saints. It's called that because you're always supposed to celebrate the Lord's Supper on feast days. This is the Feast of the Lamb, given to us on the Feast of All Saints.

And I like that word: feast. It's a good word. It inspires images of Thanksgiving Dinner and pig roasts and big ole' pot lucks. Feasts, where you eat and eat until you're so full you can't even move. You're so satisfied that you can't even think straight. You just want to rest there and enjoy it.

That's the Lord's Supper. It's a spiritual feast. In which just a little bit of bread and little bit of wine, not nearly enough for a meal, becomes a blessing greater than we can possibly imagine. Filling us up with our Lord's Spirit. Giving us a moment of rest from our grief. Because we know the saints in heaven are enjoying that same feast as well. And we will all stand together before the throne of God one day. Amen.