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Pentecost 23 – All Saints’ Day – November 5, 2023

“How Blessed Are Those Who Know Their Need for God”

Read: Matthew 5: 1 – 12 and/or Memorize: Mt. 5: 12

You may be familiar with this story or one very similar to it. It is as wonderful as it is true. A successful business man, who graduated from this elementary school, is invited back thirty years later to give the commencement address to a group of sixty-one sixth graders. They are about to graduate from an elementary school in a very poor part of one of our major cities. Things have changed over those thirty years.

If these boys and girls follow in the footsteps of the school’s other alumni, only about six or seven of them would graduate from high school. It would be incredibly remarkable if any of them went on to college. The business executive, as he gathers his thoughts began to compose the customary commencement address. You know, it goes like this, “Work hard, keep your nose clean and your shoulder to the grindstone and – with a little bit of luck, you can make it just as I did.”

The problem was it sounded pretty hollow. Unlike this man from thirty years ago, no matter how hard they work, the deck is stacked against them. They have little reason to hope and even less reason to try to beat the overwhelming odds stacked up against them. The man knew something radically different was called for if he was to make any impact whatsoever.

If his presence in their lives was to be more than a momentary diversion, if these children’s future was to take a different shape, a different texture, something had to change. So, in place of that traditional commencement address he made a surprising announcement that graduation day. He promised to each and every one of the sixty-one boys and girls that he would pay for their college education. Completely! He announced that he had established a fund and had made an initial deposit of \$2,000 per child. To that amount he would add enough each year until the compounding interest and additional contributions would be sufficient to fund the college education of all sixty-one of them.

Six years later, the students were in twelfth grade. Sixty-one of them! There had not been a drop out. Three children had moved away but they had remained in touch with their benefactor and the promise continued to hold for them as well. The grades of all these children were far superior to those of their predecessors. One of the ironies of their situation, they had done so well that they qualified for academic scholarships and were awarded them. They had accepted their benefactor's invitation to drop in from time to time. They confided in him about college and career. An astounding fifty-eight of them finally attended college.

Over the years following, there were periodic updates but all reported the same thing: the lives of these individuals were markedly better than what they would have otherwise been. You see what happened in the lives of these young people? Because the shape of their future was changed, their present was also changed.

In place of a conditional future, "if you work hard and apply yourself, then you might overcome the odds against you and succeed," now there was an unconditional promise, "because your education is paid for as a gift, not as an entitlement, your studies are not in vain. Your efforts have meaning and purpose and will bear fruit."

In theological terms we would call this the difference between law and Gospel, between demand and promise. The business executive's act of benevolence is an excellent and living parable of the Gospel.

Rather than the Sovereign God saying, "work hard, keep your nose clean and your shoulder to the grindstone and you might overcome the overwhelming odds against you and gain citizenship in my Kingdom." Our gracious benefactor chooses another way and instead makes an astounding promise: "Because I love you, I will assume the impossible steep cost of securing your final future. I give that future to you freely, as a gift now."

Such a magnanimous and magnificent gift, free and unearned, engenders the free response of faith, love, trust and gratitude. When we understand that that promise was not just made to sixty-one children many years ago, but is also made to us and has become part of us, an integral part of our identity; which guides and directs our every action. This promised future, eternal life, is something we can count on and eagerly await.

We know that its advent is utterly independent of our success or failure. Because of that the very way we look at it, think about, plan for and live our lives is altered fundamentally. It is as if the Words of the Bible, “you are a new creation,” are happening in this very present moment.

Because of that, we have a whole new perspective. The Beatitudes give us that perfect window into this new breathtaking panorama of life. Through them we see that when we are poor in spirit, when we mourn, when we are meek, when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, when in short, we haven't a single credit to our spiritual account, then we are truly blessed.

We are blessed because we know our futures are not finally dependent on our spiritual wealth, the absence of anguish, the puny strength or meager righteousness that we possess. We are blessed because God cannot fill cups that are full, only cups that are empty. When we are empty vessels, that is when we are best prepared to receive the future that is God's promised gift to us and not our moral or spiritual accomplishment.

It has been paid for by our spiritual benefactor. Martin Luther describes it in his Small Catechism: “All this God has done out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, though I do not deserve.” And of the second person of the Trinity, Luther wrote, “He has saved me at great cost from sin, death and the power of the devil, not with silver or gold, but with the holy and precious blood and the innocent sufferings and death of His beloved Son. All this He has done that I might be His own, live under Him in His Kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness . . .”

Because God in Jesus has made us citizens of His Kingdom, transferring us from a final future secured by our accomplishments to a future guaranteed by His divine promise, our lives now, in this present moment, take on a new shape and have a new texture. In a very real sense because of it, we live life backwards, moving from death to life. God treats us now as the people we will be when His Kingdom comes in all its glory. Again, the beatitudes give us the picture.

Because we have obtained and shall obtain mercy, we are now free to be merciful. Because we see God, our hearts are even now purified by that promise. For purity of heart is to place our trust in God and God's promises rather than in our own striving. Because we are and shall be called sons and daughters of God we are now and in this moment God's peacemakers, called to be about the blessed work of

reconciliation in our families, congregation, community, nation and the world. How great is the need for that in our world? As children of God, we are called to take after our heavenly Father. We know what He would do because He sent Jesus to accomplish it.

Because, in all these things, the Kingdom of Heaven is ours, we are and will be subject to persecution for righteousness' sake. The world is ill equipped and decidedly reluctant to hear and heed God's Word of meekness and mercy; unready to receive God's gift of purity of heart and peace. So, it is precisely in our efforts to live by faith that the Spirit of God holds ever before us the future our Father had promised us and the Son has purchased for us. And we, who know our need for God are blessed and renewed in the promise.

So, what shall we do? Shall we drop out? Surely you jest; drop in, talk freely with our benefactor about the choices confronting us. For precisely in the struggle and the choosing, we are blessed. Blessed to bear witness to a jaded and suspicious world: to announce to each and every one that their way too has been paid; that their future awaits them as a gift.

Count me in: To whom will you show mercy or any of the other qualities of the blessed?