

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 5:1–12

Sermon: All Saints' Day 2023

In Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, the climax of the story comes when a family is in deep trouble. The husband, the hero of the story, is about to be executed during the Reign of Terror in Paris. The man who loves the hero's wife, however, is virtually identical in appearance to the condemned man. Had the hero been executed, perhaps the look-alike could have taken the dead man's wife for himself. Instead, through trickery, he substitutes himself for the hero. The look-alike becomes the hero. He goes to the guillotine and dies in place of another. As he prepares to die, he utters this famous line: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done."

There is a story greater than any in Western literature—that of Jesus of Nazareth, God among us, who by his life, death, and resurrection now determines history. In Jesus, there is a far greater reversal. In Jesus, the great reversal is possible for everyone. The celebration of all saints is about the great reversal we have experienced in Christ Jesus.

This is the reversal from sinner to saint.

The Beatitudes characterize the ministry of Jesus, what he came into our world to accomplish. Jesus' ministry is what produces the great reversal that one can experience for all time through Word and Sacrament. The cruel fate inflicted on humanity was the pronouncement of God's word of wrath that in Adam all die. Adam passed onto his heirs not just a physical legacy, but a spiritual one as well. The physical legacy is obvious to the eye.

Our senses tell us that we are physical beings, a link in a chain that connects us to what was before and what will be. Each of us stands in a family relation that is both past and future. What is not so obvious to the eye is the depth of our spiritual poverty in Adam. To see and understand that one needs the pronouncement of the Word. We cannot judge our spiritual nature. It is a world unto itself, a world that we are not yet fitted to understand and comprehend. To understand it in this lifetime, one must rely on what God says about it.

From its infancy, the human heart is cut off from God, disconnected. It's hard to believe in the optimistic smile of a baby. To the extent that we focus on that smile, we are on the surface.

God sees beneath the surface. The greatest achievements of humanity in art, literature, and science are impressive on the surface, but God sees beneath the surface and sees human pride and duplicity. We are accountable not just for the outward work, but for the inward reality as well. The outer and inner worlds do not “square,” the inner world of the human soul is replete with sin that condemns. This is the legacy given to us by Adam. It is beyond our control. God’s revelation is, in Adam we die.

The ministry of Jesus, however, reverses this. Indeed, in Adam we die, but in Christ we live. In Adam we are made sinners. In Christ we are made saints. God takes the initiative and reverses his word of wrath in the ministry of Christ Jesus. Jesus’ work on the cross frees us from sin. He is both God’s yes and no. He is the Father’s “no” to condemnation and “yes” to life.

The great reversal can be illustrated vividly in the following way: in the Garden of Eden Adam failed us and brought us under the wrath of God. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus redeemed us from the wrath of the Father by offering himself for us in active obedience.

By a tree Adam failed us. By a tree Jesus redeemed us in his obedience. The great reversal from sinner to saint. God in Christ Jesus reverses the eternal course of those who are wedded to Christ Jesus. We are on a new path that is prompted by the Spirit, who was given to us as a token of the promised redemption in Jesus. It is a path of freedom, a path of forgiveness, a path of mercy, and a path of life.

The great reversal is illustrated by Paul in the marital image. In our spouse, Jesus, all good things are offered to us, the bride. Jesus also takes from his bride what is ailing her and gives to her all his perfections and all that he has won for her on the cross.

On this All-Saints' Day, we are especially mindful of all the saints of God for whom the marriage feast has been consummated with their entrance into eternal life. They have defied the physical laws of chance; they are alive in Christ Jesus. They have experienced the great reversal in its fullness. They inspire us to wait with confidence for the day when God will usher us into life eternal with Jesus and all the saints.

The Beatitudes not only characterize the life and ministry of Jesus, but they also characterize our lives as Christians. Having experienced God's wrath reversed by the cross of Jesus, we seek to live under the cross. We seek to live lives of reversal, that is, lives that are characterized by repentance.

The Beatitudes are filled with the spirit of repentance thinking in an altogether different way than the thinking in the world. The different way of thinking is the only way to approach God from Baptism and forevermore. There is no such thing as one way of thinking in the context of justification and another way for sanctification. Repentance initiates the Christian life and sustains it as it enables such a life to receive God's grace and love in the proclaimed Word, the energizing Word that creates the condition and content of belief.

The Christian life is lived under the cross, where we intensify our need, to intensify God's grace in our lives. The human notion of being blessed is not to hunger, not to thirst, not to mourn, but to be filled. Humanity seeks to secure itself against the insecurities of life. The instinct to be full and satisfied is the stuff of which wars are made.

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Feuerbach was in a sense right when he said that a god is a projection of human longings. This is true of the world's god, a god based on reason, on emotional, political, and social expediency. For their god cannot become human. This is the god that is the object of humanity's longings and thoughts, the god created by humanity without the aid of Scripture.

The God of Scripture, however, is no projection of human longings and thought. God speaks for himself. He judges for himself. God says that his ways are not our ways. The great reversal for us as Christians means that we do not think about God what the world thinks about God.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, the Father of Jesus, is not an object of our thinking, but God who chooses to reveal himself to us in Jesus. We are not to know God in the way of the world. We are to know God through Jesus Christ as the Word is preached and produces a life under the cross, a life of repentance.

The radical idea of great reversal in the Beatitudes is that our weakness is strength, for it provides the occasion for us to be strengthened by God through faith in Christ Jesus.

Our spiritual need and want are occasions to experience what God has to offer us in Christ Jesus.

Unfortunately, there is much emphasis in the contemporary Christian church on the heroic. The emphasis is on being strong, full of oneself and certain. The great reversal says just the opposite. The hero is Christ. Can we be full of Christ and his gifts in Word and Sacrament? The great reversal intensifies God's grace, for by that grace we have experienced the greatest reversal: from sinner to saint.

The academic study of the life, legacy, and theology of Martin Luther is complicated because there is so much secondary literature about him. No theologian has been mentioned about more. A big issue in Luther research always has been, and continues to be this: when did the Reformation breakthrough occur? Scholars fight over this issue and write dissertations directed toward each other. What we can say for certain about Luther and all baptized Christians is that the great reversal occurred in Luther's life when it occurred in ours: Baptism.

It may have taken him some time to realize the gifts of his Baptism as the only comfort for a conscience hounded by sin. Perhaps his Reformation breakthrough occurred when he went back to his Baptism as the great reversal. So, it is for us as well. We experience ongoing spiritual breakthroughs at the font of Baptism. There let us remain. When we are vexed by a guilty conscience, let us run to our Baptism. In our Baptism we have experienced the great reversal: from sinner to saint. Therein is the meaning of the celebration of All Saints.

Amen