

## ***Blessed, Salted and Lit***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
November 3, 2024 – All Saints Day  
Text: Matthew 5:1-16

This is a unique Sunday in so many ways. For one, this is “time change Sunday” when folks both savor the extra hour of sleep last night and complain about it getting dark around 4:30pm. Yeah, I don’t like that part either. But, other than repealing Daylight Savings Time, what is there to do but endure. The good news is that Daylight Savings time returns on March 9!

Today is also a Communion Sunday and they are always special to me. I love the sense of us being one big family joining in a special meal with Jesus as we remember how much he loved table fellowship; how much Jesus loves each one of us. That is a real gift we celebrate every time we share in Communion together. It is a part of the incarnational theology that makes us who we are. Now what do I mean by incarnational? I mean that we embody our faith in the way we live and practice our faith in the world each day. Our faith is not words we say, or bible verses we memorize or prayers we recite. Our faith is lived out every day as we treat others with kindness, gentleness, respect and love. Communion is intended to be our tangible nourishment for this work of making the Gospel of Jesus come alive in us. It is so much more than just special little cups and tiny cubes of bread. It is our faith made touchable and tastable!

And, finally, this is a special Sunday because it’s All Saints Sunday. Falling on the first Sunday after Halloween, this Sunday is dedicated to remembering and celebrating all the “saints” we have known and loved in our own lives who are now in God’s nearer presence. Our recognition and celebration of All Saints Sunday is a fairly recent development in Protestant churches and certainly not all churches observe it as we are doing today. Technically, All Saints Day falls on November 1 as the day after All Hallows Day or Halloween.

But the timing of All Saints celebrations are flexible and our habit in this church has been to observe it on the first Sunday after Halloween. All Saints Day dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE in the Roman Catholic Church and its original purpose was to honor “all saints of the church whether they are known or unknown.”<sup>1</sup> In the Protestant tradition, those churches which do celebrate it use it as an opportunity to honor the memories of all loved ones we have lost over the years as they make that final transition to God’s nearer presence. It’s a unique opportunity for us to acknowledge together the losses we have experienced so we can recognize that we are never alone in our grief. This Sunday also enables us to celebrate all that these loved ones have meant to us, acknowledging that knowing them has forever changed who we are. So, to me, this special Sunday is a true gift and blessing we celebrate together.

I don’t know about you, but this year’s celebration of All Saints Day feels especially poignant somehow. Maybe it’s because of the folks we’ve lost this year who have been so instrumental in the life of the church in so many ways. I think as Bazaar season rolls around; we are so very aware of the folks who used to be at the center of those preparations who are no longer with us. I’m thinking about Bob and June Sicilian and what a number making all those live evergreen wreaths did on our fingers! I’m thinking about Barbara Colby and the jewelry treasures and Blanche Zimmerman selling tickets to the Christmas Tea. I’m thinking about Linda Evans and the Silent Auction, her sea glass treasures and so on. I’m thinking about Ernie Evans calling the church to see if Linda was still here. I’m remembering Judy Bartlett and her faithful tallying for the Silent Auction. I’m remembering Gene LeRoy and the gigantic crocks of soup he’d set up in the sanctuary back room for all the folks working the Bazaar. Who else am I missing here? (*Pause for responses*). Yes,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All\\_Saints%27\\_Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Saints%27_Day)

so many dear to us, so much a part of our Christmas memories who are now keeping an eye on us from heaven. Sometimes you can almost hear them offering a suggestion or two....

Yet here we are without them, finding a way to move forward in a world without them in it. Finding a way to pull off the Bazaar, to participate in the Holidays even though sometimes our hearts are breaking. We do it because we honor them in being able to keep on keeping on. All too often that means just putting one foot in front of the other for another day. And that's enough. Then there are some days when, if we're thinking about what a mess our country and the world is in right now, we're glad our loved ones don't have to experience the anxiety too many of us are living with these days. Peter and I find ourselves saying far too often that we're so relieved our parents aren't around to see the divisiveness and vitriol which seems to dominate everything connected to the election these days. They just would not understand it, nor would they believe it. In truth, I know they would be so disappointed that such a situation could arise in this country. On the other hand, perhaps the wisdom that got them through two world wars and the Great Depression would enable them to be less fearful than we feel about things these days. They not only trusted that good ultimately triumphs over evil, they knew that making each day count for something was the only way forward. They literally made lemons out of lemonade day after day and had some amazing stories to tell as a result. They literally made blessings out of tragedies. They remind us we can do the same.

I think this is why I found myself gravitating toward the list of Beatitudes from Matthew's Gospel which we read just a moments ago as our Scripture text for today. The Beatitudes are a list of challenges and troubles which Jesus reframes as blessings. The challenges are easier to see when we sort of reframe them again, putting the emphasis on each challenge: *Note: You can compare my reframing if you check out the WR scripture text as I go through these.*

- If you are feeling down or depressed – poor in spirit – it’s okay because God knows how you feel and will lift you up once more;
- If you are really missing someone you love who has died, it will be alright because God knows how much your heart aches and God’s own self will comfort you;
- If you feel like life is always getting the better of you, that things are never going your way, don’t let those feelings get you down because God knows how special you are and has special plans in mind just for you;
- If you are anxious to see good people thrive and evil people get what they deserve, God feels the same way and will see that somehow that happens;
- If you are kind and gentle to other people, even strangers, even when it’s not easy or convenient, God sees this and when you need help it will be there;
- If you look for the good in people and situations, God will make sure you find it;
- If you work hard to help others through those rough times when anger is too much a force for them to manage, God will see you and know what you are doing;
- If you experience anger and insults and resistance when you try to do God’s work in helping others, don’t be afraid, because God loves you and will give you strength;
- If people get so angry at you for being a faithful person trying to live a faith-filled life that they really come after you, know that all people who try diligently to do God’s will experience these hardships and that God is with you through them all.

Challenges becoming blessings. Granted, this view of how to approach the rough patches in life can seem pretty “pie-in-the-sky” and naïve. I

mean, really, I'm supposed to be glad if someone insults me because I'm making a decision based on what I think Jesus would expect me to do? Well, yes, actually you are because in making that decision you are accepting in advance that God loves you and that God wants your life to be filled with blessings, even when days are bad and people are yucky, to put it mildly. That, as we all know dear ones, takes real effort. To look beyond the irritations and disappointments of the present in order to find where God is in the midst of a situation is no easy task. This is precisely why Jesus articulates these challenges we all face at one time or another as blessings. Because they are. Why? Because they give us that gentle nudge to get out of ourselves in order to look for God in the moment. And that, dear ones, is always worth doing.

That right there is a pretty incredible text but amazingly, Matthew doesn't stop there in his recounting of Jesus' teachings from this "sermon on the mount" as it's known. Matthew notes that now Jesus switches gears. He's no longer reframing challenges as blessings. No, now he is using an every day item as a tangible example of what it means to live your faith so its real to you and to others whom you encounter. He says, you are the salt of the earth! Salt, in Jesus' time was incredibly precious because it was the primary way, if not the only way, of preserving food people needed to survive. So, if Jesus is calling us the salt of the earth, that means we are central to God's plans for us and all God's people to survive and thrive. We are what keeps it all happening! But we can't take our faith – what we know and have experienced of God's love – to ourselves and not share it with others because if we do that, we are no longer salt! We're nothing, useless to God and God's vision of love, peace and hope for the world. We have to be salted and stay salty!

Still the analogies continue! Next Jesus says we are the light of the world! But, like a city on a hill, we cannot allow our light to be hidden. We have to make sure the light of our faith, of what we know

and experience of God's love, is not hidden but shining bright for everyone to see. We must let our light shine for all to see, even though, if we're honest, sometimes there is a temptation to hide it. Think about it. How often do we think things like, "I don't need to wear my relationship with God like an armband. It's enough that I know the difference God makes in my life. That's my business and no one else's." Sound familiar? I'm sure it does. We've all been there at one time or another. We know what it's like to be trapped in an uncomfortable situation where things being said or done by someone else are just plain wrong. Worse, we know they're wrong but we just don't want to speak up about it. That could be embarrassing! Maybe. But maybe everyone else is uncomfortable too and just too afraid to say something. That's how bullies become bullies, dear ones. They say and do awful things because they've figured out that most people just don't want to "get involved." They keep their lights under a bushel instead of letting it shine bright.

That, dear ones, is precisely what Jesus is telling us not to do. He tells us our faith must shine brightly to reflect the light and love of God to those who need it most. We have to be salty enough to preserve faith when it starts to falter as times get tough. We need to recognize our challenges as blessings so we can keep moving forward on the path Jesus has placed before us. Being blessed by Jesus is how we are able to reveal the way to the kingdom of God, right here and right now. We must let our lit-up faith shine so brightly that our love of God and the other is visible for all the world to see. In other words, we just have to be willing to keep stepping out in faith. We need to celebrate that we are in truth blessed, salted and lit.

Faith, how we understand our individual relationships with God, is what brought us here today. And I'm guessing most of us learned that faith from one or more of the saints in our lives – those very saints we honor and celebrate this morning. I'd like to end today with a little poem I came across this past week. It's author is unknown but

someone who knows what it is to love someone now in God's nearer presence. Here it is:

*'Tis only we who grieve  
They do not leave  
They are not gone  
They look upon us still  
They walk among the valleys now  
They stride upon the hill  
Their smile is in the summer sky  
Their grace is in the breeze  
Their memories whisper in the grass  
Their calm is in the trees  
Their light is in the winter snow  
Their tears are in the rain  
Their merriment runs in the brook  
Their laughter is in the lane  
Their gentleness is in the flowers  
They sigh in autumn leaves  
They do not leave, they are not gone, 'Tis only we who grieve<sup>2</sup>*

A blessed All Saints Day to you. May you feel blessed, salted and lit this day, and always. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Burgess, Ed., *All Around Halloween*, ©2019 Wild Goose Publications, p. 20.