

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

November 2, 2025 (All Saints Sunday, Year C)
Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31

Thanks to Rev. Katie Hines-Shah for the inspiration for this sermon

It was a beautiful fall day, as Kelly Fryer sat in a seminary classroom. The professor was TRYING to teach about salvation, about grace, but the students were distracted, and no one was REALLY paying attention. He couldn't help but NOTICE. In a fit of exasperation, or maybe even rage, the professor moved to the blackboard and drew a giant arrow pointing DOWN. He said, "If you understand that, you understand EVERYTHING you need to know about being a LUTHERAN." And then he LEFT the room.

In her book, *Reclaiming the L Word*, Fryer writes about her classmates' RESPONSE: "We just sat there, staring at it, this enormous, stark ARROW pointing STRAIGHT DOWN. And then, I thought the most logical thing I could think, given everything that just happened. 'He thinks we are going to hell.'"

The next time the class met the arrow was STILL on the board, and the class was much more SUBDUED. The professor said, "Here's what this means. GOD ALWAYS COMES DOWN. There is never ANYTHING we can ever do to turn that arrow around and make our way UP to God. God came DOWN as JESUS.... GOD ALWAYS COMES DOWN."

Today is the day we celebrate the Saints, both those who are famous, like St. Mary and St. Francis, and Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Teresa, and also those near and dear to our own hearts, like Pastor Bob, and so many more. We remember that WE TOO ARE SAINTS, called into the great company as the beloved people of God.

And while we might be tempted to just EXTOL their VIRTUES, it's important to REMEMBER – THESE people AREN'T saints because of how GOOD they were, or how SUCCESSFUL, or WORTHY. THEY are SAINTS, WE are SAINTS, for ONE REASON: because GOD LOVES us. It's just like the professor SAID: JESUS COMES DOWN.

Did you notice that in the Gospel reading today? It says that "Jesus looked UP at his disciples." This is NOT the sermon on the MOUNT; It's the sermon on the PLAIN. In other words, this isn't an EXCLUSIVE message for those who've climbed to the TOP, which is GOOD NEWS for MOST of us. No, people of ALL kinds are there on the PLAIN – farmers from Judea, and urban folks from Jerusalem, and even GENTILES from regions of Tyre and Sidon. And they aren't just ANY people – they are the WORST KIND of people, at least as far the WORLD is concerned. They're SICK people, and people afflicted with evil spirits. And yet, Jesus DOESN'T AVOID them. Jesus walks AMONG them. Jesus HEALS them. Jesus calls them BLESSED.

Which must have been CONFUSING.

The world TELLS us that BLESSING LOOKS a PARTICULAR WAY. Wealth and power. Popularity and beauty. Health and wellbeing. Family and friends celebrating together. And probably a golden retriever? You know, everything that **#blessed** entails.

Some things don't CHANGE over 2,000 years.

When Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," the people on the plain must have scratched their heads. And when he said, "Blessed are the hungry," they must have wondered if they HEARD him right. "Blessed are you who weep," must have made people QUESTION if Jesus even KNEW the DEFINITION of "blessing." By the time he got to "blessed are you when people hate you," some WELL-MEANING person probably wanted to take Jesus aside, and EXPLAIN to him that he got it WRONG.

And Jesus hadn't even GOTTEN to the WOES yet.

When Jesus proclaims WOE to the rich, the full, those who laugh and the popular, his disciples' must have had a sinking feeling. How were they EVER going to make a MOVEMENT on THESE terms? Who would want to VOLUNTEER, to GIVE, to be PART of CHRISTIANITY NOW? NOBODY would sign onto THIS life.

Except, of course, WE ALREADY HAVE. ALL people SUFFER, whether they're CHRISTIANS or NOT.

We just don't want to BELIEVE it.

ALL of us, no matter HOW RICH, or FULL, or HAPPY we are, EXPERIENCE GRIEF and LOSS. ALL of us, no matter how SMART and POWERFUL we might be, experience FAILURE.

We just don't like to ADMIT it.

I once heard someone say, "Just because everyone ELSE who ever lived has DIED, doesn't mean that I plan to." And maybe that's our curse. We can't ACCEPT that we human beings are LIMITED. That we can NEVER, EVER make our way TO GOD on our OWN.

So GOD COMES DOWN. God blesses us. Even when we're poor and hungry and grieving. Even when we SUFFER, even when we FAIL.

Maybe even ESPECIALLY then.

Don't misunderstand me – Jesus didn't mean that it's GOOD to hurt or do without. He just KNOWS that we ALL HAVE these experiences. He knows we ALL NEED HEALING. He knows we ALL need BLESSING.

Blessing, after all, isn't JUST what we EXPERIENCE, whatever that HASHTAG implies. Blessing is ALSO an ACTION – an action of INTENT, of HOPE, of CARE. The WORLD DOESN'T bless much, but WE CHRISTIANS DO. We bless backpacks and quilts. We bless buildings and meals. We bless marriages and babies. We bless people who are DYING. I think this is SO POWERFUL; SO DEFIANT.

After all, a quilt or a prayer shawl made with human hands, a Girls Matter Period. kit of a handful of supplies, WHAT can THEY do? They seem so SMALL in the face of the world's coldness and ignorance. And yet, we INSIST on doing unto OTHERS as we would HAVE them do unto US.

A meal or a building seems SMALL against the forces that would pull families and communities apart. But FAMILIES are BUILT ONE DINNER at a time. Giving our time and talent to a food shelf, a community meal, a youth center, to a CHURCH is OUR way of reaching OUT to HELP those in need.

A young couple, a new baby, WHAT have they PROVEN that DESERVES a BLESSING? Well, NOTHING, YET, but with OUR HELP, with our PRAYERS, maybe they can live INTO the FULL LIFE GOD has INTENDED for them.

And what about those who have come to the END of THEIR FULL life, those who have fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith?

It gets harder over the years to be a pastor. In my ministry, in 25 years, I have now given 199 funeral sermons. These were people I prayed with, and people I loved. I sat with them in their last days, I met with their families, I grieved. And then, on your behalf and by your side, I blessed them. I made the sign of the cross on their forehead and at their graves. Together we proclaimed that they are God's beloved. We named them then, just as we name them today: God's blessed ones, God's saints. Nothing changes that.

NOT EVEN DEATH.

We Christians believe that death is not the end. We Christians believe that when all OUR work is FINISHED, that is PRECISELY where GOD'S work BEGINS. Jesus CAME DOWN from heaven. Jesus CAME DOWN among the people on the PLAIN. Jesus CAME DOWN to the GRAVE, and then to the very GATES of HELL, DEFYING EVERY WOE. In places of SIN, and SHAME, and DEATH, JESUS INSISTS on BLESSING us, bringing forgiveness, healing, and life.

Jesus CAME DOWN so that we ALL MIGHT BE SAINTS. We don't need to WAIT for that. We can OWN our sainthood NOW.

And this is so IMPORTANT, because times are HARD. It seems like we ORDINARY people are POWERLESS. Too sick, and sad, and hurting, and small to make a DIFFERENCE. But then

Jesus COMES DOWN to shows us the WAY – a HUMBLE, SIMPLE way, a way of joining WITH HIM in SERVING those he LOVED, those HE NAMED BLESSED.

We can pray, even for our enemies, we can give away quilts, and prayer shawls, and kits, and groceries, and meals, and more. We can offer our time, talent, and, this STEWARDSHIP season, our TREASURE. We can HELP First Lutheran be a PLACE where those who are hungry and poor, weeping and excluded can experience the REALITY of Jesus' Beatitudes. JESUS, IN COMING DOWN, to quote St. Paul, enables us to do FAR MORE than WE could ASK or IMAGINE. Jesus COMES DOWN and BLESSES, THROUGH YOU.

To him be glory and honor, forever and ever. Thanks be to God. Amen