

I suspect there are several means by which people know that the Fall season has arrived. Some of you may have your own personal or family markers, but I wonder if we can agree that are certain general indicators that work for all of us. Let's look to see if that is true.

One reliable marker has always been the opening of school. But, you know, with year-round schools, it's harder to say this is a reliable indicator.

Then there's the turning of leaves. But that's more prevalent elsewhere and not so much where we live.

You might say that the changing of weather from hot to cool is a reliable signal of fall, but—given our recent temperatures--that's obviously not so predictable in Southern California.

So far, we're not doing so well in this, are we?

What else is there? Well, the time change! Even though they keep messing with the Sunday involved and it keeps getting later in the year, there still is a reliable change back to Standard Time that occurs in the Fall.

So, that's one.

Now, I'm not sure that we can find too many other such signs in our culture, but there is a big one in our church world. It occurs every year on November 1, and it's such a major marker in the church that, regardless of what day is November 1, we are given the choice to celebrate this occasion on the following Sunday. And that's what we are doing today.

All Saints' Day is, then, not only a marker of the Fall season, but a recurring indicator of the day the church sets aside in memory of those saints, living and dead, canonized, or just ordinary folks like us.

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Before we consider the scripture chosen for All Saints' Day, I want to share three quick stories with you—and I want you to listen closely to see if you can figure out what they all have in common.

Story Number 1: A gardener struggled to make enough money to feed his family. That was his first priority. But he also needed a small truck so that he could do his job, maybe even pick up a few extra jobs. So, scraping together enough to buy the truck, he finally was able to do better, until—someone in his neighborhood put sugar in the tank and ruined the truck. He was back to where he started.

Story Number 2: Sally enjoyed nothing more than the company of her five grandchildren. Getting up in years, it became more and more of a challenge to keep up with them, but she tried. And then a bout of pneumonia came along, followed by a small stroke, followed by a diagnosis of Parkinson's. Now, not only was she unable to keep up with them, she felt so bad much of the time, she couldn't be with them at all. Pretty soon their parents did not bring them since it seemed to be a burden for Mom, and visits were distressing to their children.

And our third story is this: An 86-year-old woman, fit and trim for her time of life, was standing in a checkout line at Trader Joe's in Santa Cruz. A wild four-year-old girl, unsupervised at least for the moment, ran into her at full speed, knocking the woman down. The girl's mother then hastened to the scene, grabbed the child by the arm, and said, "Let's get out of here," never checking to see if the older woman was hurt.

We'll come back to these stories in a little while, but for now be thinking about what they have in common, and what they have to do with today's Gospel from Luke. Then [Jesus] looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now...Blessed are you who weep now...'

In so many words, Jesus is saying, blessed are all of you who have picked the short straw in this life, all of you whom the world calls losers, stragglers, down and outers. Jesus says, God sees you, God loves you, and eventually, counter to what the world identifies as success, you will have front row seats in the kingdom of heaven.

Absolutely shocking words, stunning concepts, to his first century listeners, who lived in a place and time where wealth was considered a sign of God's favor. Of being on the A-team, making the Honor Roll, getting the Oscar. And now Jesus is saying the poor can possess the Kingdom of God. Jesus is saying the last one in line will be the first one in. Not only does it make no sense to them, it angers many among his listeners who smart from his stinging words.

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Today's passage comes to us from a section of Luke's Gospel known as the Sermon on the Plain. It resembles the more familiar Sermon on the Mount contained in Matthew's Gospel. In Luke it is called Sermon on the Plain because Jesus "came down with them [from the mountain,] and stood on a level place." (6:17).

Luke's version is much shorter (3 introductory verses + 30 teaching verses) compared to Matthew's (4 introductory/concluding verses + 107 teaching verses—about three times the length), and stands out especially because in addition to the "blessings," Luke's Jesus also provides us with the "woes."

The writers of the two Gospels use the material in different ways, and one of the clues to this is where they place the "sermon."

In Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount comes early (5:1 - 7:29) follows almost immediately after Jesus' baptism and temptation, preceded only by his call of the disciples and a series of miracles that Matthew describes briefly. Matthew—the teaching Gospel—then uses the Sermon on the Mount to lay out an overview of Jesus' teaching focus.

Luke places this sermon later in his Gospel because his concern is emphasis rather than exact chronology. The stories that precede it are rife with conflict, such as Jesus touching a leper (unthinkable), forgiving a man's sins (how audacious), calling a tax collector as a disciple (outrageous) and mixing with tax collectors (something decent people would not do).

The conflict stories serve as a backdrop for Jesus' Sermon on the Plain because in them scribes and Pharisees take offense at Jesus for violating religious standards. The religious authorities try to defend a traditional understanding of God's people; Jesus counters, by showing them a new way—but they refuse to see.

Jesus then gives his Sermon on the Plain in which he further turns their legalistic world on its head. In this sermon, Jesus gives them a glimpse into the kingdom of God—an upside-down world by their standards—and, truthfully by the world's standards yet today.

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Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven." Bible commentators can fuss over this saying a bit, noting that in Matthew's sermon Jesus speaks about the poor in spirit. So which is it, poor or poor in spirit?

I'm not sure it matters, because either way you look at poor, it is not a desirable state. Poor financially. Poor in spirit. Poor in health. It all gets lumped together at the bottom rung of life.

Do you ever find yourself humming a tune, or singing the words of song and wonder why you are doing that? Do you ever backtrack to figure it out?

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As I was preparing for today's sermon, I found myself thinking a lot about the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, as Jesus describes it, where roles are reversed and blessings are abundant. Then, unconsciously, I started to hum a country song that is pretty obscure, even though it was written and sung by Johnny Cash.

Cash wrote about a man who felt pretty special, quite elite, because he was given a backstage pass to a Willie Nelson concert. At the intermission, the man exercised the privilege of this pass by going back stage. He was excited as he imagined all the rich and famous people he would see.

So, what did he find? Here's a verse from Cash's song that tell the story:

"There were wackoes and weirdoes and dingbats and dodoes. And athletes and movie stars and David Allan Coe. There was leather and lace and every minority race, with a backstage pass to the Willie Nelson show. Oh, I wish, you could've been there. But maybe you were."

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Jesus teaches and preaches about a Kingdom of Heaven that is much broader and more inclusive than any heaven we could imagine, or maybe much broader and more inclusive than any heaven we want to think about. It might be kind of scary, after all, a kingdom that includes people we're pretty sure ought not to be there, like all those "strange" folks back stage at the Willie Nelson show.

Where do we find ourselves in Jesus' conversation about the Kingdom of Heaven?

Most of us work really hard to make ourselves acceptable in this world. We want to look good, be comfortable, go out to dinner, have a decent home, take a trip now and then. We want to be independent. We want to look like people who have succeeded, are smart enough to figure a few things out, who have fought the good fight and landed on top.

Nobody wants to be a loser.

And yet I suspect that many, if not all of us, are plagued with some form of doubt or insecurity or indecisiveness or worse. Maybe despite what our lives look like on the outside, maybe inside some of us are suffering greatly, fearful that the “truth” of us may be discovered. What if our friends knew everything about us? What if we knew everything about them? Might we be rejected? Might we reject others?

That could happen. That’s a real-world possibility. The world does not like losers, failures, poor people, hungry people, sad people, sick people, addicted people, dying people.

But Jesus does. And he blesses them and welcomes them into the Kingdom.

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So now back to our three stories: the gardener whose truck was ruined and who now once again finds it more difficult to make a living, the chronically ill grandmother now denied the light of her life—her grandchildren; and the mother who whisked her daughter away from the disaster the daughter had caused. What do they all have in common?

Well, each one is a story about poverty, of being poor. The gardener’s monetary poverty was made worse by the spiritual poverty of whoever put sugar in his gas tank. The grandmother’s poor health was aggravated by the poor decision-making of her children who kept her grandchildren away from her under the false notion that it was best for all. The mother who snuck her daughter away from the scene of an accident the little girl had caused was definitely poor in spirit, lacking moral courage and ensuring that her child will be poor in this same way.

Some forms of poverty make us sad. Some forms of poverty we can nicely ignore. Some forms of poverty anger us.

But here is the amazing thing Jesus has to say about all of this poverty, be it about money, or health, or spirit. Be it about those other people—or about ourselves: All of this poverty is not the last word about these people, or about us. Having no money, having no health, having no heart—none of that is beyond the love of God to redeem.

Each of us gets a front row seat in heaven.

Each of us gets a back stage pass to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen.

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