

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
11/2/2014, All Saints Sunday  
Revelation 7:9-17, Matthew 5:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In my humble opinion, we do a good liturgy here at Immanuel. Worship is important to us here. It always has been. I inherited that kind of a congregation from my great predecessor, Pastor Raymond Schulze, long ago. It is a regular joy for us to hear our Choir and to hear one another sing our hymns and liturgy and to hear Dr. Toth at the organ or the piano. Not only is it a joy for us, but our traditional liturgy helps sustain our faith as we go through life in this world.

So, we do a good liturgy here at Immanuel. But an even greater one is ahead of us. That is the theme of this Sunday's First Lesson, from Revelation 7. That is my opening text. It is about a tremendous human congregation – beautifully diverse, from every nation, tribe, peoples, and languages – and it is about their liturgy:

<sup>9</sup>After this I looked, and there was a *great multitude* that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

<sup>10</sup>They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"  
(Revelation 7:9-10, NRSV)

Some of our loved ones are already in this heavenly chorus. I can imagine the beautiful baritone of Pastor Schulze there. I can picture my mother and father there. You too have loved ones who now rest on that far shore. I bet there are all happy.

Now, as it turns out this happy multitude and their praise of God and the Lamb is our human half of a heavenly antiphon. The other half is sung by the angels. We have heard of "angelic voices." Well, we are going to hear the real angels:

<sup>11</sup>Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many *angels* surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, <sup>12</sup>singing with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:11-12, NRSV)

Imagine that: we human creatures sing our praises, and the angels themselves answer back, "Amen! Well done!" and then they sing, and we answer to them, "Well done, you angels!"

And if have ever been uplifted in a liturgy on earth and made better by that liturgy, so we will be made even better by that heavenly liturgy, which is important because we have a whole universe to explore and we need to be good people to do it.

This is what we want: to be part of yonder crowd. This is what will make any present troubles connected with following Christ fade away into joy: to be part of that great multitude standing before the throne and singing praises to our God. So, on this All Saints Sunday, let us resolve to be even more earnest in our faith, so that as far as lies possible with us we mean to sing, “When the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there!”<sup>1</sup> I want to be there. I want you there too.

## How can we?

How can we? How can we make sure that we end up in that great heavenly chorus someday? After all, isn’t this the chief question facing any of us? Isn’t this the question posed to us by Jesus himself?

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:26, KJV)

Well, to this great question, “What can we do that we might end up in that heavenly chorus someday?” the good news is “Nothing! Have no fear. Your fate is safe with Jesus.” This is the great lesson of Reformation Sunday, just last Sunday. The question about our fate is one that belongs to Jesus, and for that we can be grateful. We can praise God and say to ourselves, “I sure am glad that I belong to Jesus and that my destiny can rest with him.”

As for us, the doctrine of justification by faith teaches us that neither our sin nor our piety decides the matter. Good thing too! For if joining the heavenly chorus someday depended on us, we might well fumble it away. We’ve fumbled some things in the past, haven’t we? It is better to trust the matter to Jesus, for he is good and wise and he is the One appointed to be our Final Judge and our Final Savior.

In fact, that is the point of the doctrine of justification. That doctrine would discipline and retrain our eyes, so that we look in hope not to ourselves, but to Jesus. The doctrine asks us to pin everything on Jesus as our Savior, and not on ourselves – neither our sins nor our excellence. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

...“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:29, NRSV)

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/When\\_The\\_Roll\\_Is\\_Called\\_Up\\_Yonder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/When_The_Roll_Is_Called_Up_Yonder)

This is one of the simplest versions of the great doctrine of justification by faith that I know: If we boast, let us boast of Jesus, and not of ourselves.

So, to the legalistic question, “What might I do to win eternal life?” the Gospel is “Nothing. Leave that to Jesus, for he is the Savior.”

Ah, but there is an entirely different kind of question, and to that question, there is very much that we can and should do. That question is this one: How might I live here and now that I will be living a life pleasing to my Maker? Or more simply, How might I live a good life? How might I live a full life? Even, How might I become a saint?

These are questions not about justification, but about sanctification. These are not questions about earning my salvation, but simply about how someone who pins everything on Jesus should live day to day. These are questions about a good and holy life. And these are the questions that we can turn to with joy. Entrust your final salvation to Jesus, who is trustworthy. Now turn to the really interesting questions in life: How shall I live – I who count on Jesus? How shall I live a good life in the time that remains to me? How might I live a more saintly life?

## **The Sermon on the Mount**

And for these questions, we can turn to today’s Gospel Lesson – the Beatitudes, which start that beautiful sermon of our Lord called The Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 5-7)

First off, notice that the Beatitudes are not always exhortations, but rather declarations. Consider one of the last Beatitudes, for example:

<sup>11</sup>Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. (Matthew 5:11, KJV)

This does not mean that we should seek to be reviled and persecuted and slandered. Indeed, I hope that you might go through all of your life serving Christ faithfully, but without being reviled or persecuted and spoken meanly of. So, the beatitude does not call us to seek such hard times, but rather assures us that nothing can strip of us of Christ’s blessing if such reviling should come the way of the disciple. It is as Saint Paul says in Romans 8:

<sup>38</sup>For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, <sup>39</sup>Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39, KJV)

Likewise with the Beatitude about mourning:

<sup>4</sup>Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.  
(Matthew 5:4, KJV)

This does not mean that we should seek to mourn. How could we? If we mourn, it means that this world has lost another good one – someone dear to us. No, the Beatitude does not mean that we should seek to mourn, but simply, blessed are those who mourn: for they shall be comforted. It means, place your trust in Jesus, even when your heart is breaking, and one day you will be comforted, you will be happy again. This is a Beatitude that means much to us as we remember those who dear to us who now rest with Jesus on yonder shore and who see him now with even better vision than we can.

The Beatitudes describe the sorrows that come the way of the Church. Not every Christian suffers them, but the Church as a whole does, because the Church follows Jesus, who was poor in spirit, meek, a peacemaker, someone who hungered and thirsted for righteousness, and so on. Jesus knew all of the sorrows we will know, but let us stick to him, and in remaining true to him we will indeed be blessed.

## **Purity of heart**

So, in general, the Beatitudes are not exhortations, but rather declarations of comfort to the Christian.

But it seems to me that there is one of those Beatitudes that is indeed an exhortation. In fact, I think it is a key to the question of sanctification: How might I live a good and holy life? Answer:

<sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.  
(Matthew 5:8, KJV)

Again, the doctrine of justification by faith warns us against trying to win heaven through purity of heart. Fair enough! But the doctrine of sanctification says to you and to me quite firmly: Seek purity of heart. That is part of a good life. That is the right kind of life for someone who counts on Jesus, who has the most pure heart this world has ever known.

This is nothing new. The Bible has always longed for us that we should gain a new and better heart:

<sup>31</sup>Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 18:31, KJV)

This is the beginning of a holy life, this is the beginning of a saintly life: that we should seek purity of heart.

## Work at it

I don't know about you, but it seems to me that it is easier for some people to be saintly than it is for others. I mean, in our congregation, you and I have been blessed to know some very sweet-hearted people. It is one of the greatest privileges of being a clergyman that I have been able to know some people in our church who would not hurt a flea, who seem never to speak an ungenerous word, or even to have an unkind thought.

Of course, we can never really know the ways of the human heart. Only God can know the heart. What seems easy to me looking on might be very hard for the person himself, herself.

Still, I think that each of us can make some progress in the matter of purity of heart. It takes work and practice and internal discipline, but we can get better at this matter of having a pure heart.

One of my favorite lines in moral theology comes from C.S. Lewis, who said this:

... the distinction between *pretending* you are better than you are and *beginning to be* better in reality is finer than moral sleuthhounds conceive.<sup>2</sup>

This points to our external conduct. It reminds us that the start toward a pure heart might simply be that we behave ourselves better out there in the world. So, for example, if we are angry with someone, we can nonetheless conduct ourselves in a gracious way. We can at least speak courteously and not seek to embarrass that person and put them to shame.

Likewise, if we live a life that is too often unchaste in thought, word, and deed, we can begin by working at the last of those three: our deeds. We can begin by doing what is right and refrain from what is wrong when it comes to matters of sex.

And in our life as Christian stewards, if we are giving nothing to the church, and if we are clearly losing the great battle between God and mammon, well, we can start putting some money in our offering envelopes.

But a holy life invites us to more than this. A holy life asks us to press on from deeds to our heart. A holy life asks us to work at reshaping our character and our habits and our instinctive responses so that we become ever more Christ-like.

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*, page 15.

So, we can work on our deeds. Good. Excellent. But next let's try to work at the worlds in which we hang out, because our social settings have power to incline us toward vice or virtue.

And right off the bat I can congratulate you on some good progress in this regard, because here you are: you are in church! This is a setting that should incline you toward virtue and away from vice. That is what I work at. That is what our Sunday School teachers work at. We want it to be the case that when you and your children come to church, you will in some measure feel stronger when you leave. We want anyone who comes to church to meet Jesus here, and in meeting him, to be made stronger for life in the world.

Conversely, try to step back from those social settings that incline you toward trouble. If hanging out at bars really isn't working for you, then get your feet moving away from the bars. If political websites, for example, are simply riling you up and making you an angry person in this world, then consider forsaking those websites. After all, there is still a lot of good literature for any of us to read. And there are better ways to use our time than we often have been using our time so far.

And then there is another step. It concerns the Beatitude "Blessed are the pure in heart." That is, we can practice discipline in our internal lives and imaginations. Instead of brooding, for example, about that one who has made us angry, instead of carrying on internal conversations in which we rebuke that person, instead of dreaming of the defeat of the one who makes us angry, we can work at more helpful and charitable thoughts about the person.

Or, instead of daydreams and fantasies that stoke up lust, we can train ourselves to think even better thoughts about meeting and getting to know people in this world.

The goal of a pure heart is that we should become more Christ-like in this world, even in the privacy of our own hearts. We do not have perfect control over purity of heart, but I do believe we can make some progress in the matter.

## **Unable to see progress**

We ourselves might not see the progress. Becoming a better person and improving our character is a mysterious process in which we might not be able to see the difference in ourselves, though others will. Or we might not be able to detect our progress until some time has passed and we can see the larger picture.

Many good things are like that. We work at small steps, but they end up pretty grand. For example, during Coffee Hour, you will see that I am wearing a beautiful burgundy-colored vest. My wife, Carol, knit it for me. She didn't even use a pattern. She just sat there in the evenings, while we watched the Belgium detective Poirot on TV, and she knit the vest, one stitch at a time. And if you come to the parsonage in December after our Christmas caroling at Lenox Hill Hospital, you will see the most fantastic quilt in the world. Carol just recently finished it. Again, it was a matter of small steps, but they add up to something gorgeous.

Likewise with getting a more pure heart. We might be struggling so hard to be charitable toward others, that we might not be able to see what others looking on might see about us: that we seem to be more mellow these days, that as we get older, we seem to become gentler. Indeed, we might become more saint-like, which I think is a good thing to commend to us on All Saints Sunday, and a good thing for any of who bear the name of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.