



“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?”

Luke 6:20-31

All Saints Sunday

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Our Saviour Lutheran Church

West Lafayette, Indiana

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You are patiently waiting in a traffic jam. You know those long lines of traffic when the road narrows from two to one lane because of construction. Everyone is patiently taking their place in line. Then you see one car go speeding by on the shoulder passing up all the traffic until it cuts in at the last moment just before the barricades end the lane. You hate such brashness. How can someone be so rude and inconsiderate? All you want to say is “Who do you think you are?”

I am sure that Jesus encountered a similar reaction when he uttered the words of today’s Gospel. When Jesus spoke these words, he was brashly declaring that the world is not as it appears to be. Even more, he claims for himself the authority to turn this world upside down and inside out and make a new world. The people who heard him must have wondered, “Who do you think you are?”

Jesus dares to reorder and rearrange the world as we know it. With a brashness and boldness that was sure to catch everyone’s attention, Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor, . . . blessed are you who are hungry now; . . . blessed are you who weep now, . . . blessed are you when people hate you . . . exclude you, . . . revile you.” And cursed are the rich, the famous, the happy, the laughing and those with full stomachs.

Like some brash heckler in a crowd, like some insolent teenager who continually clicks the remote and interrupts our favorite TV show, like some speeding driver who cuts in line, Jesus thumbs his nose at a world that has got it all wrong. No wonder Jesus’ critics complained, “Who do you think you are?”

It gets worse. Jesus not only defies the social conventions of this world, he contradicts what religious people have always said about God. God gives people what they deserve. Follow God and His ways, God will bless you. If you don’t, you will be cursed. God loves the righteous and sticks it to the wicked.

“Jesus, who do you think you are?”

Jesus must have sighed, “I’m glad you asked. Watch me. Listen to me. You will see who I am.”

Jesus' answers startle and surprise. He dares to call God, the creator of the universe, "Pappa," "Daddy," . . . "Abba." As a brash and bold adolescent in the temple in Jerusalem at the age of 12, he boldly declares that he must be about his "father's business." He was not referring to Joseph's carpentry shop in Nazareth. Elsewhere Jesus boldly declares "I and the Father are one." And "No one comes to the Father but by me."

Jesus' brashness gets even more daring. In the name of God, he is the "Friend of Sinners." The defenders of religion continually criticize Jesus for eating and drinking with sinners, with tax collectors, thieves, crooks and other such undeserving people . . . *in the name of God!*

"Jesus, who do you think you are? . . . God or something? I nothing sacred any more?"

Such an upstart cannot be tolerated! Jesus must die!

It was people like us who killed Jesus. It was the people who wanted to be good, who get out of bed on a Sunday morning to go to church, who could not tolerate Jesus. The people who killed Jesus believed that God's love was for good people. The people who insisted that Jesus must go believed that good deeds must count for something for before God.

So we hung Jesus on a cross. We mocked him. "Jesus, come down from the cross, if you are what you say you are. If your kingdom truly is God's kingdom, then God won't let you die!"

When Jesus did not come down from the cross and dies, we were relieved. "See, he was wrong. Sure, God is love, but God only loves those who deserve God's love."

"Jesus, who did you think you were that you thought you could get away with undermining God? You said, 'Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, the outcast? Cursed are the rich, the healthy, the happy and the popular?' Sorry, Jesus. You're wrong."

But that was not the end of the story! We know that and that is why we are here today. On "the third day" Jesus was raised from the dead and all bets were off. It was a stunning conclusion to Jesus' story, every bit as stunning as it was that day when Jesus uttered those blessings in today's Gospel. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God vindicated everything that Jesus had said and done. Yes, Jesus got it right! It was "the religious people," the defenders of that whole system of deeds, merits, score keeping and ladder climbing, who got it wrong!

God's love for sinners, for those with broken hearts and broken lives, will not be thwarted. "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful and the outcast!" Not even death can separate the love of God in Jesus from the dispirited and dispossessed of this world.

Because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, Jesus truly is what he claimed to be. The reversals he authorized in today's Gospel were not wishful thinking or the deranged dreams of some fool. They were no pie in the sky sweet by and by. Jesus creates "the real world" where the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful and the scorned are blessed. In this world of the Kingdom of God, they are not the cursed. They are the blessed. They are the SAINTS!

We find it so difficult to believe that we could ever be numbered among the saints. We know that our lives are too tarnished to ever receive such accolades.

Let me show you what I mean. For many years, I began my confirmation class with an exercise that revealed just how difficult it is for us to believe such a startling announcement.

"OK, students, I have a question for you. Who of you thinks you are a saint?"

The eyes of the students dart around the room trying to figure out what to do next. Finally, one of them asks, "But pastor, what is a saint?"

I answer, "A saint is someone who is perfect in the eyes of God. A saint is someone who is very special, different, set apart from the rest of the crowd."

More silence. My answer must have scared them off. Finally, someone raises his hand. It is Dan.

"So, Dan, you think you are a saint. Well, I bet if I told your sister, Carla, that you thought that you were a saint, she would break up laughing. I am sure that she could give me a long list of your flaws, weaknesses and disgusting habits. You know, big sisters are very good at keeping such lists on their little brothers."

Then I asked again, "Dan, do you still think that you are a saint?"

Slowly his eyes and his hand dropped. He was no longer so sure that he was a saint. I looked at the class again and asked, "Who of you thinks you are a saint?"

The class had learned its lesson. No one was foolish enough to raise their hand and think that they were a saint. They now knew better. Everyone's hands were glued to the table.

What I said next shocked them all. "I want ALL of you to raise your hands, even you, Dan. You all are . . . saints!"

They looked confused. What was going on here? Then Dan quizzically asked, "But Pastor if none of us is perfect, how can we all be saints?"

"Dan, you are right . . . and you are wrong. None of you are perfect. You are all sinners. BUT . . . you are saints because . . . I say you are!"

Well, not exactly. You are saints because . . . **GOD says you are.** When I tell you that you are a saint, holy, perfect, I am telling you on behalf of God. God says that to you because of what Jesus did for you. Because of what God in Jesus did for you and promises to you, you are a saint, perfect, holy. To be a saint is to be forgiven. It is not what we do that makes us so special. It is what Jesus has done for us that makes us so special. What makes the church so special is that this is the only place in the world where that message gets told. You are not going to hear it on the news or in school. When you believe that message, your life is changed.

When we believe what Jesus says, we "get to" live our lives differently. We "get to" live with honesty, integrity, doing what is right and not just what is approved by the latest opinion poll. In the midst of an anxiety-ridden world we can live with "the peace that surpasses all human understanding." We can turn the other cheek and go the extra mile. And most of all, we can actually believe that our dreadful past has been overcome, that our sins have been forgiven. We no longer need to be ashamed. We can come clean. We can tell the truth . . . in this brave, new, real world of the Kingdom of God.

Even when we are at the end of the line, the back of the bus, the rear of the room, the bottom of the list, the last one chosen because no one wants us on their team, sitting on the bench because the coach won't play us, alone on a Saturday night without a date, . . . even when we wonder if we can make ends meet, . . . even when we have heard that terrifying diagnosis, . . . even when tears are flowing down our cheeks, . . . we can rejoice! We can leap for joy! Because standing there next to us with his arm around us is Jesus!

So, when a suspicious world asks, "Who do you think you are?" we can answer, "We are the beloved sons and daughters of God, princes and princesses in the Kingdom. We are . . . the Saints. Why? Because Jesus says so!