

Luke 6:20-31  
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“Saints Under Construction”

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I was so relieved this past Wednesday to discover a number of the entrances to 894 from Beloit Road and off of highway 100 in Hales Corners were opened. Those closures have re-routed errand runners for months.

Is it me, or does it seem like the Milwaukee area is eternally under construction? When we moved here 16 years ago I heard the quip we all say about the seasons in Wisconsin. We have two of them; winter... and... say it with me... road construction.

When we first moved to Wisconsin I naively imagined the day all the streets would be fixed, all the jackhammers fall silent and at last everything that needed to be built would be finally finished.

As I said, naively. I now know it's never going to be all done. In fact part of Milwaukee's identity is that it will always be under construction. But even though I know this, in my mind there is still that imagined Milwaukee that's totally complete. It's unattainable, but still, we can imagine it. It's never going to happen, but we can imagine it; in fact, we have to imagine it.

In the beatitudes we read this morning, Jesus is doing exactly this kind of imagining, on a cosmic scale. He imagines what a completed, all-fixed, no longer under construction humanity would look like. The entire sermon on the plain paints a picture of the imagined kingdom of God. It's an ideal scenario of the final reality, the perfection where God's love reigns over all.

These verses so familiar to us are called the “beatitudes” after the Latin word for “Blessed,” the word beginning each verse. “Blessed” means we understand that God has made us holy. And most simply put “Holy,” means we are set apart. The goal of the Christian life, with the picture of perfection in view, is to understand that we are set apart, not above nor below anyone else, not better than Muslims, or Jews, not better than fundamentalists, nor worse; not inherently better or worse than Ba'hai' or Sikh, or Buddhist's, or Hindi, not above or below atheists or agnostics, or Unitarians... ‘Holy’ means we are set apart due to our faith in Jesus Christ, our calling, to love and justice, our purpose to leave the world and each other better than we found them... we are called to be people who encourage the entire world to grow toward that vision of perfection. In this sense Preachers sometime joke that these are the “Beatitudes,” a guide for our very being.

We hear as the beatitudes today offer a long list of nearly impossible virtues which portray the completed-ness, the perfection of humanity. And like a completed Milwaukee, they are impossible. But the point is, like a fixed up Milwaukee, we have to be able to imagine it; we have to hold the ideal in our imagination so we can reach for it. We have to be able to imagine where we are supposed to be headed in order to head that way.

Martin Luther, the great 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformer, made this point in lovely words. "This life... is not righteousness but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming... We are not yet what we should be, but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished, but is going on; this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory but all is being purified."

On this All Saints Day, I contend that a saint is someone who has a keen focus on this imagined picture of perfection, and is working and praying each day to grow toward it. We reach for perfection in spite of it being unreachable. And to be a person "under construction" we really have to know that each of us, personally, needs some construction work. To put it in bumper sticker lingo, "Be patient with me, God is not finished with me yet."

As Christians we need concrete ways to remind ourselves of this call to grow toward God. One of the ways we do this is through the Call to Confession which we offer in worship on Sunday's we share communion. You may have noticed there is an ebb and flow to worship. And on these Sundays, and others as well, the idea is that we gather at church, we turn over to God all the sin, temptation, mistakes, excuses, trials, burdens, illness, struggles, we empty ourselves of all of that, and then in our empty state we are prepared to be filled with the Good news of God in scripture, sermon, and on communion Sundays we go one step further and receive the concrete grace and forgiveness of God in the bread or wafer, the wine or juice. These symbols, shared in a community of faith, consecrated for us, fill the emptiness we have created in our confession and make space for this heavenly vision, this divine undying love to renew and strengthens us as we continue striving for the imagined perfection, to continue growing.

Today we celebrated the lives of 3 people from our congregation who died over the last year. We call them "Saints" even though not one of them was perfect. All of them were under construction to the day they died. We even dare to call ourselves, indeed all the faithful, "Saints" in this same protestant way; even though not one of us is perfect. We too are under construction until the day we die.

So given our imperfection, how dare we trust that all will be well in the end? How dare we trust that all is well for those saints we named today? Reiner Maria Rilke was a 19<sup>th</sup> century German Poet, a man of deep faith. He penned this poem.

"We are all falling, this hand's falling too—All have this falling sickness none withstands. And yet, there's always One whose gentle hands this universal falling can't fall through."

Herein lies our hope: "There's always One whose gentle hands this universal falling can't fall through." This is the hope of all of us who are under construction.

When we have done our best, loved as we can, obeyed faith as we might but still know we are anything but perfect, still under construction, we trust that, "There is always One whose gentle hands this universal falling can't fall through."

Amen