

# Surrounded by Saints

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Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...

Matthew 5: 6

Today I want to talk with you about saints. Not the traditional Roman Catholic idea of saints as exceptional people set aside by God for exceptional and miraculous work, nor even less the traditional Protestant idea of saints as those living in Biblical times and now safely out of the way. No, the saints I want to talk about are 'saints' in the New Testament sense of the word: faithful people.

Paul in particular loves the word saint. It's all over his letters, and he uses it freely. He starts his letter to the Ephesians, "From Paul, an apostle of Jesus, to all the saints living in Ephesus;" and he closes his letter to the Romans, "Say hi to Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, oh, and Olympas, and all the other saints who are there with them." He urges the Corinthians to work hard serving the saints, the poor people, beloved by God. Paul loves the word saint, and he uses it freely, but never carelessly.

The Greek word Paul uses is *hagiois*: holy ones, faithful ones, people who are trying to live a life connected to God.

Paul believes in the saints, all the saints, even when they go off on strange paths, even when they need but don't heed his words of insistent correction. Why does Paul believe in them? Paul believes in their desire to live close to God.

Paul believes in people who hunger and thirst for righteousness, people who long for a right relationship with God, even when they remain thirsty, even when they are left unfilled.

Some people were surprised a month or so ago when Mother Teresa's personal diaries were released, showing her to be a person who so often struggled with God's absence, and not one surrounded by God's presence. Teresa was a person often left lonely by God, but a person who constantly thirsted and hungered after that closeness with God. And in that sense, in that biblical sense, she is a saint already.

But, you know, we are surrounded by saints. So many saints.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." It could as well say, blessed are you saints. We sometimes translate *makarios*, 'blessed', with the word 'happy', instead. "Happy are the ones hungering and thirsting for righteousness, for justice." And *makarios* can mean happy, sure. But Jesus isn't talking about happiness, Jesus isn't speaking about an emotional state.

He is declaring a fact about the saints. He is saying something about God: These faithful folks are blessed by God. They are favored, preferred even, by God.

The best English translation I can think of for *makarios*, is our word 'okay'. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for a close relationship with God, they're okay. They're okay with God. God knows they may or may not be happy, look at Teresa of Calcutta. That's not the point. They point is, they are okay. They are all right with God. And Jesus adds one more thing: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Yes they are empty now. But that emptiness won't last.  
 Yes, they may be lonely now, but their loneliness won't last.  
 Yes, they may be feeling their distance from God now. But that distance will not last.

When I read this verse of the Gospel of Matthew I can't help but skip ahead to the vision of John of Patmos at the end of the scriptures, when John is asked, "Who are these robed in white, and where have they come from?" And John shrugs and answers, "Lord, you know." And the voice says to him:

"These are the ones close to God, these are the ones who are with God day and night. Sheltered by the lamb of God, they will hunger and thirst no more, for the Lamb will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to the waters of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

They are close to God.  
 They are full of God.  
 And perhaps, in some mystical way I don't get and can't hope to get, they are happy as well.

But that is a projection into the future, says Jesus.  
 Don't worry about that right now, says Jesus.  
 Right now? says Jesus. Right now you are blessed.  
 Right now you are okay.

Blessed are those who are hungering and thirsting for righteousness, for a right relationship with God.

Righteousness is a funny word. Know what the opposite of righteousness is? In theological terms the opposite of righteousness is greed. Being all about yourself. It's hard to be all about yourself when you are focused on a right relationship with God. When you are focused on a right relationship with God, you are focused on other people. God's people.

Blessed are the ones hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Blessed are you saints.

Matthew introduces the Sermon on the Mount in kind of a strange way. Matthew says, “When Jesus saw the crowds, he headed up the mountain.” Now, in the gospels, when Jesus goes up a mountain he wants to do what? He wants to get away from the crowds! He wants to pray. So Jesus goes up the mountain and he sits down. And he looks up, and there are his disciples, coming to him. They didn’t get the memo. They didn’t take the hint. So, finding himself surrounded by the saints, Jesus begins to speak and to teach them. And the camera focuses in on him and his words.

But at the end of the Sermon on the Mount the camera pulls back and you see a different scene. Matthew writes, “When Jesus had finished saying these things the crowds were astounded at his teaching.” And it’s clear that the crowds Jesus was trying to escape are the very folks Jesus has been speaking to and teaching. Jesus finds himself absolutely surrounded by people who are hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Jesus is surrounded by saints.

I told you last week that whenever anybody asks me, “Hey, how come your church gets two saints, Paul & Andrew?” I say, “Honey, we’ve got so many saints you wouldn’t believe it.” What I didn’t tell you is that I sometimes add, “At St Paul & St Andrew you can’t throw a stick in the sanctuary on Sunday morning without hitting a saint.” And that’s true! Look at who you are! Look at what you do! Look at how hungry we are! Look at how thirsty we are! Look at how we yearn for God, for a real relationship with the source of our lives.

We’re surrounded! We’re surrounded by saints.

Today I want to finish up by mentioning just one of the saints. I could pick so many. But this week I’ve been thinking about Etta Shepherd.

Etta was a life-long Methodist who lived across the street, and walked by this church every day and never noticed it was here. But that was back in the day when things were a little quieter here. One day Etta was late going to her church uptown and said, “Looky here! This is a Methodist church! When did this get here?! I could just stop in here. And when she came in we were singing an old spiritual from her childhood out in New Jersey and she felt like she had come home.

Etta was a retired social worker, and she used to volunteer every day at the food pantry. She did all the interviewing and all the case management. Now we have a staff of five full-time social service counselors... We paid her a small stipend, and every week she turned around and gave it to someone who needed money for college, or who was between jobs, or to some kid from the church who wanted to go to camp, or some student wanting to come on one of our work trips.

Etta always called me ‘Ducky,’ and I never knew if it was a term of endearment, or if she just couldn’t come up with my name. But I didn’t take it amiss.

As a professional, Etta hated the way I went about dealing with people who came to the church looking for money. One day she looked up from what she was doing and

she told me, “Ducky, you got sucker written on your forehead, and you’re not helping anybody.” I finally realized she was right, and I went to her to tell her so, and before I could get the words out she said, “Ducky, I watched you with that young man just now, and I realized I was wrong.” So I let it slide.

Etta’s gone, long gone; giving God a hard time, I believe, telling God: “Ducky, you gotta get this right!”

But today, I want to call Etta’s name into the air, loud enough so that she can look up from whatever she’s doing and call me back. And I won’t be surprised or take it amiss, if I hear a quiet “Ducky!” whispered back to me.

Let’s spend some time calling out the names of our saints.