Sermon for Nov. 2, 2025, All Saints Day

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O God, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Did you know that Google's AI will write a sermon for you?

Here's some of the advice it gave me about preaching today about the Beatitudes from Jesus's Sermon on the Plain:

> Preaching should address the "woes" pronounced on the rich, the well-fed, and the joyful, emphasizing that these are not condemnations of wealth but warnings against a life of comfort.
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> It should challenge the congregation's comfort.
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> Encourage generosity and a willingness to share, and Challenge the congregation to be a source of hope and comfort to those who are suffering, weeping, and ostracized in their own communities.
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> Preaching on this passage can challenge listeners to examine their own comfort and worldly attachments while affirming God's special concern for the marginalized and suffering.

I had to stop there because it made me squirm, for two reasons.

First, what I hear in this advice is an assumption that the "congregation" is made up of people who are *not* among those named "blessed" in Jesus's litany — that is, *not* those who are poor, hungry, who weep, who are hated, excluded, and reviled.

It assumes that I am speaking to a gathering of people who are not suffering, people who are well-

fed, without pain, physically, financially, and emotionally comfortable.

I wonder in how many churches this morning that is true.

Just sit with that for a minute. What do we assume we know about the person sitting in front of us? Or the person in the grocery aisle? Or the person waiting for a bus? Or the person showing up at the food bank?

In almost all cases, a congregation or any gathering of people on the street is bound to include people who are suffering – are worried about having money to pay next month's mortgage – are hungry – went to bed or put children to bed without food last night – have been bullied or taunted or regularly othered, treated as sub-human in their day-to-day interactions.

Right now, you're thinking, no doubt, of all the people who are about to be without the means to feed themselves and their loved ones as SNAP benefits are cut off tomorrow. That very current event brings hunger to the forefront of the news today, just as Thanksgiving and Christmas bring the needs of "the poor" to our minds for two months of the year.

But the AI advice is based on assuming those people are *not* sitting next to you.

This advice tells the preacher to make those of us who think of ourselves as comfortable — with enough resources to feed and shelter ourselves adequately, with the ability to conform to social norms in our dress, behavior, identities, and appearances such that we blend in — to make us *un*comfortable so that we can give generously to those "less fortunate" than ourselves.

So, I am bothered by the assumption that the comfortable are in here and the unfortunate are out there — by how it *erases* the fact that there *may indeed* be among us those who are worrying about paying the mortgage or feeding ourselves. Who are suffering in untold and invisible ways.

The other way this advice—this artificially intelligent sermon—makes me squirm is that it urges us to give of our abundance to help those who are suffering. I am worried about the way that, taken at

face value, this too easily becomes condescension: let us help you — we are *able* to help you — we are in a better place than you are.

And in this, it allows us to ignore what we have in common. Focus on "us" and "them" erases the ways that *all* of us share in human suffering. It allows us to continue to look away not only from the ways we participate in systems that create suffering, but also to look away from our *own* brokenness.

After all, at one time or another, each of us has experienced loss, fear, worry, misunderstanding, judgement, exclusion. But it is easy to forget those experiences, or to ignore them. Our comforts, and the ways we seek comfort, allow us to turn away from our own experience of suffering, to turn away from the fact that to be human is to experience pain and loss.

Across time and cultures, the question of why we suffer, how we are to understand it, and what we are to do about it has consumed thinkers, theorists, and theologians. From Marx writing about the suffering caused by the separation of the industrial worker from the means of production, to Freud exploring a child's primal angst at its separation from the safety of the womb, to the story of Adam and Eve to explain our separation from our Creator.

To be human is to experience suffering. For some of us, that is visible and life-threatening. For some of us, it's invisible, but fatal to our spirits. And some of us are able to grasp and build up ways to prevent ourselves from noticing, to numb ourselves to it.

We celebrate All Saints' Day today—celebrate the communion of saints, as we say in the Apostles' Creed.

Recently, two Episcopal priests developed Lent Madness, a bracket tournament, modeled on basketball's March madness, in which 32 saints "compete" online. Participants read about and vote in each bracket and each round, until one saint is finally crowned with the Golden Halo. At my church in Michigan, we filled out the brackets ahead of time, and if you correctly predicted the winner, you too were awarded a mug with a Golden Halo. (And btw, I won that mug two years

running.)

People are called saints because they are singled out for some reason; we admire what they have done in their lives. The online discussions each day about why to vote for one saint over another made the case about why each was the best exemplar of human behavior and faith. Francis Xavier or Wenceslaus? Elizabeth of Hungary or Mechtild of Magdeberg? In the Roman Catholic Church, the protocol for how to elevate and canonize a saint includes documenting a certain number and kinds of miracles, moving from "venerable" to "blessed" to "saint" with much pomp and ceremony. The saint is held up as someone who has lived a life of "heroic virtue" and the designation of "saint" recognizes that they are already in heaven.

I know it's important in life to have models, someone to admire and something to which to aspire. But I'm wondering in this day and age, in this cultural and political context—and I don't just mean this year, this administration, this decade, but rather a larger moment in time—I'm wondering if it isn't more important to focus on a different aspect of "the communion of saints."

We are, as Americans in this century, in this epoch, steeped in what theologian Marcus Borg calls the ideology of individualism, an ideology, he argues, that is at the heart of conservative Christianity. It influences political and religious conservatives, and it influences how a majority of American Christians understand biblical passages about helping the poor.

"According to a poll conducted a few years ago, a majority of white Christians (Catholic, and mainline and evangelical Protestants) believe that Jesus and the prophets were talking about 'charitable acts by individuals' rather than 'our obligation to create a just society'."

The alternative to this ideology of individualism is a politics and a way of living that takes seriously "the common good." Such a way of living is grounded in a number of convictions: that none of us is self-made; that we benefit from what previous generations did for the common good (think universal education, civil rights, gender equality, safety nets like Social Security), and that a concern for the common good benefits not just the community but also each individual—a seeming paradox that can confound beginning philosophy students and seem to undercut the

argument — but, it's the very circular nature of that equation that gives it power: we are individually healthier, happier, stronger when we act for the common good.

The communion of saints is the community of all of us. Not just those who are recognized, but also those whom no one knows, who live and die quietly, maybe like the tax collector in the parable last week, whose outer, visible life was imperfect, not admirable in any way, but who strived imperfectly to find his way to love God.

Last Sunday, I was at Trinity Cathedral in Portland, OR, where the interim dean preached about money — it is after all that time in the church year. He pointed to the differences between the tax collector and the pharisee, and the way that the parable required Jesus's listeners to up-end or reverse their view of them. The tax collector leans into a profound vulnerability by even showing up in the temple, knowing he is a child of God even as he is reviled by his contemporaries. The pharisee is only grateful he isn't like the tax collector — he doesn't lean into his own vulnerability or question himself. And, asserted the dean, it's in vulnerability — a key component of any loving relationship — that we grow in love. Finding ways to live into vulnerability is a part of any path of spiritual growth.

I heard something similarly resonant in Mel's sermon: the contrast between the two figures leads us to see, he said, that "God doesn't want our success; God wants us. The Holy One is glad for our worship and our outreach and daily practice of prayer and generosity and all the things we do, but all those things are meant to lead to the love of God in Christ Jesus. Each man [in the parable] is afflicted, but one recognizes it and hopes the other catches on soon." The pharisee's piety, Mel said, "has become a tool of separation, rather than a tool of human encounter with the possibility of transformation."

I think we are meant to bring this same perspective to Jesus's Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel this morning.

So much in our culture encourages us to make ourselves as little vulnerable as possible. But finding ways to make ourselves vulnerable is important practice. One of the ways to exercise that

vulnerability muscle is through giving, and not just giving what we won't miss, what comes out of our abundance. To examine what is needed for the common good, and give even when it's a deprivation to ourselves is one way to lean into our vulnerability. It takes courage.

But notice the irony: we give not to reach out to the less fortunate from our comfort, but rather because the giving transforms us. It requires that we find in ourselves a vulnerability that connects us to those who, right now, for whatever reason, need to be brought into the circle, included in the common good.

I think we miss the point if we focus only on the Beatitudes, without following the transition Jesus makes with the word "But" at the end.

Read beyond the list of "Blesseds" and "Woes" as describing two different sets of people — those of you who are poor, those of you who are full now. We are all *both* sets of people, at one point or another. If we don't see and hear in this list a description that is common to all of us, then we miss the last, most important part, which applies to all — to those who are suffering at this moment and those who are comfortable at this moment:

"***But*** I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

May we each develop the practice of recognizing our vulnerabilities, of confronting the ways we are suffering, the moments when we are in pain and uncomfortable, especially when faced with others' suffering and pain. May we find the courage and strengthen our practice of leaning in to that vulnerability in ourselves, and to thereby find, in our common condition, both our separation from God, and our way back to God, who is the only source of any comfort and blessing.
Amen.