

Up the Mountain
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

For years, when I read the Beatitudes from this gospel, I skimmed right by the first line: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.” It wasn’t until seminary that I caught on that Matthew describes the sermon on the mount, and Luke describes a sermon on the plain. And it wasn’t until my preparation for *this* message that I began to think about what significance today’s location has, other than for differentiating it from Luke’s gospel. At this point, I’ve read the Bible enough to know that the mountain setting is not just a casual note on location.

We can look back to Moses, recalling that Jesus has often been described as the “new” Moses. Moses went up a mountain in Exodus, where he encountered God, where God gave him, not once but twice, the ten commandments, and where he came away from his encounter with God with a face shining so that all were afraid. In other places in Matthew, Jesus is tempted on the mountain, he is transfigured on the mountain, and he gives the great commission on the mountain. Historically, for the Israelites and others, climbing a mountain brought one closer to God; the mountaintop is where God reaches down to meet humans. It is no accident or coincidence that Jesus ascends a mountain to speak these words of blessing, these words which speak even more to the nature of God than to the condition of humans. Certainly the Beatitudes name ways of being toward which we can ascribe – hungering and thirsting for righteousness, peacemaking – but above them is the way in which God is toward us – comforting, being merciful. Jesus’ posture of sitting is that of an esteemed teacher or ruler. Here he is both; here he is the connecting point between heaven and earth, both embodied in one. So he speaks words from God to the people below.

On this, All Saints’ Day, you may wonder how the Beatitudes really fit with those we are remembering who have died in the faith. At the very least, we trust by faith that they have received the kingdom of heaven and have seen God. They have climbed that mountain and become nearer to God, as we strive to be. When we speak of the communion of saints and being among them, being surrounded by them, I liken it to a charity walk. When I did the Avon Breast Cancer 3-Day Walk back in 2001, it was my first charitable walk. I knew generally that many, many other people would be walking also, but I couldn’t have imagined how that would feel. When the time came, we were surrounded by people

on every side, but not crowded, with people ahead, some quite far ahead, and others behind. To be part of the communion of saints has us all walking toward the same mountaintop goal, some have made it to the apex before us, and others are just beginning; we're somewhere along the way.

Preparing for today gave me the excuse to sit down with a book I've been wanting to get to called *Flunking Sainthood*. Written by Jana Riess, it covers her attempts over twelve months to undertake twelve spiritual disciplines, inspired by the saints, some as defined by the Catholic church, some as defined by Jewish tradition, some as defined by the gospels. The subtitle of the book? *A Year of Breaking the Sabbath, Forgetting to Pray, and Still Loving My Neighbor*. It is a delicious and mildly irreverent read – right up my alley. When Riess goes to define why she wanted to take on this faith experiment, she concludes that it was to know God more. She ranks each month's goal as failed, not having had any of them become comfortable or feel natural. As you might guess, her self-defined failures still bring insight and growth.

In writing on the discipline of fixed-hour prayer, stopping everything to pray at seven assigned times in the day, she says, "Fixed-hour prayer is an exercise in inhabiting the communion of saints, that great cloud of witnesses of all those, living and dead, who pray with us and for us. I feel connected, plugged in," she writes, "to something larger than myself."¹ Not unlike my charity walk experience. All of those who have come before us have struggled up this mountain, too – gotten side-tracked, even lost. We are in good company, right where we are meant to be. The people about whom Jesus speaks in the Beatitudes are plural – for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, they will be comforted, they will inherit the earth. We come together as church not so we can pay bills or fill a building; we come together because that is the way we are meant to be followers – together. After explaining her insight that thirty days was unrealistic for mastering any spiritual practice, Riess offers in her hindsight this: "I was also an idiot for trying too much of this by myself rather in community."²

We learn from one another, those seated by us, those who warmed those seats decades ago, even those who occupy the nursery this very day. We are all seeking to reach that holiest place and we all have something to offer. In a manner of happenstance, I picked up *Flunking Sainthood* because it sounded a lot like how I describe my Twitter account: musings on the ups and downs of trying to be more faithful and faith-filled. I had no idea it would speak to spiritual exercises and their challenges, especially not in such a timely way. And so, as I walk with you on our journey upward, to meet up with those who have already reached the peak, I offer these words of encouragement from Riess after weathering well a difficult event in her personal life: "all of those unsuccessful practices, those attempts

¹ *Flunking Sainthood* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2011) p. 148.

² *Ibid*, p. 170.

at sainthood that felt like dismal failures at the time, actually took hold somehow.”³ Together, let us walk to meet Jesus.

Let us pray: God, you reach down to us that we might come closer to you and those who have already come to you, and for that we give thanks. Amen.

³ *Flunking Sainthood* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2011) p. 168.