Do we want the world to change around us? Then we need to ask a harder question: “Do we want to change?” In his sermon on the plain in Luke’s Gospel, the answer Jesus is looking for is yes, we want to change. It can happen only as we give our lives into his loving care.

PRAYER

My initial reaction to this text from Luke for All Saints Sunday was that Jesus was turning the world of his disciples upside down. That’s why the bulletin cover is the way it is. I say that because the blessings and woes that Jesus spells out are the opposite of the ideals people believed in at the time, which may explain why Jesus ended up on a cross.

This text stands as a summary of Jesus’ teaching on discipleship in Luke. It began with Mary, the mother of Jesus, when she spoke the magnificat about the lowly being lifted up and the powerful put down. It could be seen in Jesus’ first sermon when he quoted the prophet, Isaiah, saying that the poor and marginalized would have good news preached to them. And it ended with Jesus telling the crucified thief next to him that he would be with him in paradise that day. Throughout Luke, Jesus’ presence in the world was turning that world upside down.

The rich and powerful who have it so easy in this world, who have people tending to their every need, will find quite the opposite in the world to come. Why so? Why would God not think he would want to be surrounded by such people in Heaven? I suppose we could ask the same question. I don’t enjoy being around people who are full of themselves, who demand pampering, who measure their faith in terms of their bank account. I don’t blame God for not wanting to hang around with them either.

Then we move to the part of the text that puts our faith to the test. It tells us to love and do good to no gooders. (I made that up). Don’t strike back. Give to those less fortunate without a thought about what’s in it for you. That’s the stuff of being a saint. Again we need to ask, do we really want to change? For selfishness is our natural inclination, being sinners as well as saints.

Sainthood begins with our understanding of the depth of God’s love that he showers on us every day. It is unconditional, meaning it has no requirements or prior conditions before it is given. I think it is difficult enough for us to show that kind of love to loved ones, let alone enemies.

For instance, married couples often hedge on their unconditional love. It is the kind of
love that is declared on the wedding day. When difficulties arise in the marriage, there is often a challenge to that love. An indication of less than the ideal may be in statements like, “I will try if you will try.” Or, “I’m willing to work on it if you are.” Then love is already moving from unconditional to conditional, manipulative, selfish motivations that Jesus died on the cross because of.

That selfish kind of love can be seen among teenagers as they begin to explore relationships and intimacy. One night they find themselves parked on Skyline Drive and things begin to get physical. Soon a critical decision will be made by someone. As things heat up, perhaps there is hesitation on someone’s part, and bargaining. And then the words come out. “If you loved me, you would let me.” At that point it becomes obvious that love has nothing to do with the relationship, as Tina Turner once sang. Love is self-sacrificing, other oriented, and gives the other the gift of freedom and not tyranny. In those young relationships there needs to be love, respect, and guidance from faith in Jesus. That was the message in some songs by the Christian rock groups the youth group went to last weekend.

If it is difficult to show unconditional love to loved ones, Jesus really turned the world upside down when he taught we should love our enemies and pray for those who abuse us. There is no way we can do that, unless we have first given ourselves to God in Christ, who can and will help us change our hearts. It is the power of the Holy Spirit given to us by Jesus’ death and resurrection that can help us make a difference in this sinful world. It is possible that we can offer an alternative to the hate, sin, abuse and neglect that we often see in the world.

How ugly that world can be was revealed recently in the senseless murder of Katherine Ann Olson, daughter of Rolf Olson, who had been a pastor at First Lutheran here in Duluth. She answered an add for a nanny and was murdered allegedly by a 19 year old, Michael John Anderson.

Pastor Olson sent a letter to friends through e mail. He talked about his daughter, the incident, and his faith in the midst of this tragedy. “Our sadness,” he said, “for ourselves is compounded by the loss to the world of a true gift.” Then he said, “God is good. Our family is strong. The resurrection is true. We will make it.” In later correspondence the Olson family asked that when people prayed for them, they also pray for Michael John Anderson and his family. And we will.
On this All Saints Sunday, Jesus is offering to empower us to be saints bringing hope to a troubled world. We have the opportunity to make a difference, to participate in Jesus’ mission to turn the world upside down. It comes down to the question I began with. Do we want to change? I suppose it depends on what kind of world we want to live in. Amen.