All Saints Day
November 1, 2026
The Rev. Scott Walters

In the midst of a long and difficult winter, Meghan O'Gieblyn wrote a sentence from the notebooks of Simone Weil on an index card and taped it to the wall by her desk. It read, "We must try to cure our faults by attention and not by will."

Meghan's will had failed her. Or something had. After a decade of sobriety and atheism (she had lost her fundamentalist faith in her twenties) she was drinking again and also had begun meeting with a Catholic priest about converting. Both of these "regressions," as she calls them, were secrets which she kept even from her husband Barrett. "There are a million ways to sabotage one's life," she writes, "but I could not come up with anything more original than the things that had ruined my life before: alcohol and institutional religion."

That last sentence is found on page five of Meghan O'Gieblyn's new memoir, Will and Attention. My apologies. If you've been trapped in an elevator or at coffee hour with me recently I've probably already told you all about it. You've also heard how thrilled I am that Meghan will be one of our Lenten preachers next year.

A page later she says this: "The most important things in life completely elude the will. It's possible, through sheer effort, to summon cheerfulness but not happiness; piety but not faith; seduction but not love; productivity but not genius. I know from experience that it's impossible to will oneself out of an addiction. And I know that you cannot force yourself into faith, no matter how hard you pray or starve or grit your teeth. I want very much to live a good and virtuous life, without alcohol and drugs, which have made me miserable. And I still long to believe in God … But my actions suggest that part of me does not actually want these things … My will is scattered, directed toward many contradictory things, and easily distracted. Is attention the solution? If so, what must I pay attention to?"

My question for us here at Calvary this morning is this. What happens when we consider the beatitudes, not as matters for the will, but as invitations to pay a different kind of attention? And what must we pay attention to, if the things that keep you and me from flourishing are to lose their grip on us? Our own addictions and unhealthy compulsions, our shame and sins and lingering regrets, which are the sources of the harm we do to other lives as well. Could the beatitudes be an invitation to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will? Let's see.

Jesus's list of blessed ones is almost as famous as Jesus himself. When I'm in the realm of the will, I read the beatitudes as a to-do list. I need to buck up and become

poorer in spirit. More mournful and more meek. Hungrier for righteousness. Purer of heart.

What may be even less helpful is that my will often shines a transactional light on Jesus's teaching. I need to will myself into being one of the blessed ones he names in the first half of each sentence, so that I'll receive the reward he promises in the second half. Be a peacemaker so that you'll be a child of God. Get people to revile and persecute you because it will make you a rock star of a saint in heaven, right up there with the prophets!

All of this rings hollow though, doesn't it? One of many reasons I think people in recovery bear wisdom relevant to every human life is because they've learned better than most that the deepest forms of healing are often not matters of willpower. I'm also coming to wonder whether the hard sayings of Jesus, the strangest of his parables, his counterintuitive instruction not to reveal his identity … I wonder if the strangest stuff in the gospels are intentional disruptions of the will. Once I think I've figured out exactly what Jesus wants from me and am girding my loins to go do it, he lobs something absurd into the story. Something that lands like a slap from a Zen master. Doesn't the Bible feel like that to you sometimes? If it doesn't, well, I'll go ahead and say it. You might not have been paying attention.

Greek scholars point out to us that the beatitudes are in the indicative, not the imperative mood. I know, you've been hoping I'd get around to talking about verb tenses in a language I can't read. The point is this. The imperative mood is about demanding an action. But Jesus doesn't say "Be poor in spirit" or "Be meek." He doesn't even say "Be merciful" or "Be peacemakers." The indicative mood indicates. It points to something that's already happening or already exists. Which is to say, the blessedness of the ones he lists for us is not a future event or an achievement. Those who hunger for righteousness will not be blessed one day when their hunger gets filled. All these are blessed ones today, even though they look like losers and victims by the working definition for blessedness we were all taught. So maybe Jesus is not giving us moral instruction so much as expanding the field of our vision. Widening the parameters of blessedness toward infinity.

This distinction may especially matter on a day like All Saints Sunday. If you think this day is about lifting up a bunch of exemplary Christians from across the centuries to inspire us to get our spiritual acts together, we may miss the deeper grace of this feast. Baptizing twin baby girls may be a helpful corrective, though.

I have it on good authority that Jane and Cecilia Scofield haven't done much with their lives yet. They can't list a single accredited educational institution or any work experience on their resumes. With regard to moral willpower, they show no apparent interest in delayed gratification, am I right, McKenzie and Wade? And yet, in just a few minutes, we will add them to the two millennia-long list of Christian saints. A complicated and dysfunctional religious family if there ever was one. But calling them

Christians disrupts the idea that conversion is a matter of will, don't you think? These infant girls are sacramental reminders of the truth that we are God's blessed and beloved ones before we can do anything at all to earn our status as such. And if Cecilia and Jane are not seen as blessed and beloved ones by us until they prove they are worthy of love by making good choices, we will have failed them. Our first task as the Church is to let them know that they will never be any more or any less blessed and beloved by God than they are today. This is the kind of attention you and I are promising to pay to them and to the whole world when we renew our own baptismal promises along with them.

If you're still unconvinced that the grace of the beatitudes and baptism and All Saints is more about the kind of attention we pay than the willpower we muster, turn the experience around a hundred and eighty degrees. Have you ever been changed, healed, saved, not by following through on some sound advice, but in receiving the unconditional loving attention of someone else?

After a year of secret drinking in airport bars and hotel rooms, Meghan O'Gieblyn's unsustainable lie collapsed. She awoke one morning in yesterday's clothes and only the vaguest memory of leaving in the middle of the night. After a short interrogation by her husband, she came clean. "I've been drinking," she said. Of course Barrett had questions. She begged him not to ask them just yet. "I'd never been more miserable in my life," Meghan says of that moment.

But then, instead of the understandable rage and judgment she was bracing for, she felt Barrett's hand on the top of her head, which she had buried between her knees. "I knew immediately that it meant I would be forgiven," she says. "It was going to be awful. There would be more confessions, more difficult conversations, but right now, in this moment, I was being met with a mercy I did not deserve… and sometimes, though not always, I think I would choose to live through all that affliction again, to live it over just as it was, any number of times, if it was the only way to preserve this moment of grace."

Maybe it wasn't so dramatic, but have you not also been met, at least once, with mercy, with the loving attention we call grace, when you expected judgment and blame for some failure of your misdirected will? Have you never felt your broken-down self begin to be restored, maybe just from being seen by someone who believes you are not only your failures and your sins? Someone who could see you also as a well of blessedness and belovedness? Because if experiencing that kind of healing, merciful attention has nothing to do with being saved by the grace of God, what on God's blessed earth does?