

January 30, 2011

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 5:1-12

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd John F. Herring, associate rector

In today's Gospel we heard the Beatitudes, which are some of the more recognized lines in all of the Bible, let alone the Gospel according to Matthew. At this point in Matthew's account of Jesus' ministry, we are in the early stages of Jesus' public work. He has just gathered his disciples and has been teaching in the synagogues and healing individuals with all sorts of illnesses. Jesus' fame has spread rapidly and great crowds are now coming from all over to see him. Now we finally get to hear Jesus' public teachings. The Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount serve as the springboard for all that will follow.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek. Blessed are those who thirst for righteousness, the peacemakers, the merciful, the pure in heart. Blessed are the reviled, the persecuted. It is some list. Put in the context of Jesus' ministry and in Jesus' time, we can see that Jesus is pronouncing God's favor on many who are generally considered to be outside of God's favor. Typically, wealth, power and prestige are seen by many as a sign of God has blessing. Those who do not have these things lack God's favor. Not so, says Jesus. God has given favor to those who seemingly have nothing, but who are reliant on God. Jesus is telling them that the Kingdom of Heaven is near, and that being the case, it is time to start seeing things differently. God's Kingdom is radically different than anyone imagines. These Beatitudes highlight those differences.

Yet, somehow, over the years, the Beatitudes have become something else for many. For some, they are set of maxims given to us by the wise teacher, Jesus. If we somehow live by these maxims, we will be happier people. One can find them on plaques in various kitchens or framed over some placid looking art and hanging on a living room wall somewhere, reminding us of the nice, simple teachings of Jesus.

For others, they have become a set of rules given to us by Jesus, something of a to-do list, in order to gain God's blessing and eventual entry into Heaven. It is a simple formula. We want to go to heaven when we die, we do what Jesus says and God will grant us God's favor, and one day we will wind up in the Kingdom of Heaven.

I find neither scenario to be very helpful. For starters, there are many in mourning that go uncomforted. It is rare that the meek inherit anything, let alone large pieces of real estate and those seeking justice often continue to seek it right into their graves. Being persecuted is not a joyous situation either. If these are timeless teachings for a happy life, there are a lot of difficulties that are not taken into consideration.

Furthermore, if this is a to-do list in order to receive God's blessing, it is a list that many find to be heavy and taxing over time. Are we poor enough in spirit? Are we pure enough in heart? Have we been committed enough towards making peace? Are we mourning enough? This approach gives many a sense of a let down or guilt, because we feel that we fall short of them.

In either case the Beatitudes, as beautiful as they are, as poetic as they are, become distorted and then play into the mindset that we are not good enough. This idea is damaging. The truth is for many that we already feel like we are falling short, without ever considering this list. We already have a hard time thinking that God would want to bless us in the first place. We are undeserving. We are aware of our faults, our limitations, our failures. If only everyone knew about each of us, they would find us to be frauds. If we know about shortcomings, than surely God does. Surely, even God wouldn't give us a free pass. We feel left out, because it is difficult to believe in an unconditional love, when we live in a world in which almost everything is conditional. It is only natural to think that many see this lesson from the Gospel is yet another set of conditions to meet.

However, let's be clear about what Jesus is doing here. He is not setting up a list of conditions. He is proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven is near. God's Kingdom is near. It is not some place we are waiting to float off to when we die, with some price of admission. It is an in breaking of God's love, of God's system into this world right now, a system that changes everything. Jesus is including into this Kingdom a whole swath of people that are normally considered excluded. In short, Jesus is pronouncing God's blessing on people, all kinds of people, the down and out, the marginalized, the forgotten. Jesus is letting us know that God can be found in the places we least expect, with the people we least expect. And, if God is blessing even the least of us, then God will be everywhere, enveloping all of us, all of creation will be wrapped in embrace of God's love and mercy. We all can receive this happy news. This blessing existed and was extended to us since day one. We only have to accept it. Creation is good. Life is good; things will work out. No matter how tough things may seem at times, no matter how much we fail, no matter our shortcomings, God will be with us, carrying us.

This is something I think each of us would do well to remember. There are, unfortunately, many among us and elsewhere that forget, or feel left out. Each day I encounter people on the streets that have given up on hope. Each week I encounter teens and families that are stressed, worried, and confused about where God is in their lives. I have spent time with people on their death beds who have asked me if God will accept them. There is a sense among many of being inadequate.

One of the things that separate us from God, what makes us less than what we can be, is the constant thinking that we are somehow unloved or unwanted by God, or unworthy of God's grace. When we start believing that lie, we close

ourselves off from the goodness and possibilities that await us. Will God accept us?

The answer of course is yes. It is yes for all of us. Yes for each of us here today and tomorrow. God created us to bless us, not abandon us. If we can accept that, believe it, trust it, then perhaps we can begin to live into that vision a little more freely, less anxiously. Perhaps we can relax and become even more of a blessing to those around us. We can get into the business of embodying God's grace and become agents of God's work in our world and even find joy along the way. Joy is the business of bringing about God's Kingdom by being a blessing to others.

The Beatitudes are not about the power of positive thinking. They are not about earned grace. They are not about cheap grace. Jesus paid with his life on the cross. Our crosses will come too, because the Kingdom has not totally broken through yet. But we can face our difficulties; face our crosses with the knowledge that we are included in God's grace. All things will work out for our good and the good of the world.

These are God's promises for all who struggle. These are God's promises for those who have failed, those whose self-dependence is exhausted, and whose only recourse is grace. We have all been there. The Beatitudes remind us that God delights to bless and redeem all of us. Brothers and sisters, we are blessed beyond measure. We are God's beloved. These are promises for us, by the One who has always been faithful to us. Accept the promises. Become the blessing.