

“The Measure of Spirituality”

Sermon on Sunday, February 2, 2020

Based on Matthew 5: 1-12

The Beatitudes are at once the opening liturgy of the Sermon on the Mount and by far its most beautiful part. Our Thursday morning study group has been reading and discussing that section of the Bible over the last three weeks. Listening to Rob, who leads the study, it looks like the group will need another two years to get through Matthew chapters 5-7. And to me that sounds just about right. I mean, honestly, anything less than two years for the Sermon of the Mount is foolishness. Of course, we are foolish all the time in church, let's get that straight. A foolish pastor thinks he can teach our youth the concept of forgiving in one confirmation session when of course, it's the job of a life time and he hasn't himself learned it properly and all of us have failed at it many times and even Jesus didn't expect quick absorption. Just think of the disciples' famous question: "Lord, how often do we need to forgive those who have offended us?" And what does Jesus say? In his relentless fashion, "Seven times seventy times!" And we say, "What???" But then it occurred to me that he's probably saying that's how long it takes the average person to know what forgiving really is. You won't learn this lesson the first, the second or the third time. It takes more than that. God's curriculum is not a speed course.

And so it goes with the Sermon on the Mount. We are taking baby steps toward understanding a giant message. Whenever I read it, I get stuck on the opening paragraph, the Beatitudes; no, worse, I get stuck on the first Beatitude. It says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." I have probably spoken about that passage eight or nine times now, but it is still mystifying. If Jesus had said, "Blessed are the poor," we could understand, because we all know the poor need many blessings - in the form of bread, in the form of jobs, self-esteem, opportunities. But instead he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and that is a little harder to grasp. Don't we want to be "rich" in spirit? Don't we believe that those who are "rich in spirit" are blessed? Isn't that conventional wisdom? Over the last 50 years, the word "spirit-uality" and "spirit-ual life" have become church household terms. But here our Lord, the master of paradoxes, says "Blessed are the poor in spirit!" Tell me please what you'd think if Jesus had said, "Blessed are those who lack spirituality, who don't feel God?" The church alarm bells would be ringing. Yet someone like Mother Theresa wrote in her diary that sometimes she doesn't feel God; sometimes she doesn't even "have faith," she wrote. And she was faithful. And she was blessed. And her example was beautiful, more beautiful even than the Beatitudes!

I want to be careful here, but I believe Jesus gently reminds us that the true spirit-filled person is not always what we imagine him or her to be. We may picture a successful church builder and mission developer; we may see a new age monk in a prayerful pose surrounded by soothing meditative music and a large following; or someone who simply writes beautifully about faith... All those are easily identified as "spiritual" people. And probably they are. But what is the true measure of spirituality? That you feel God? Jesus says in the very first Beatitude, if I understand him correctly, (which is always a question of course!) that there are people who don't appear to be spiritual but who are very blessed, who do God's hard work, who are messengers of the kingdom of God. And for all of us who put too much currency into the importance of our own inner lives of faith and words, pastors chief amongst them, he reminds us that no, sometimes simple people doing the simple work of the kingdom are the true heroes, according to the carpenter from Nazareth. And we are blessed if we don't think of ourselves as overly spiritual but as people who are forever in need

of the spirit as it is given to us by God on God's own terms. Blessed are the poor in spirit! Blessed are even those who say they lack spirituality!

I have seven more Beatitudes to cover. How much time do you have? I will keep it simple for the next seven. Let us assume that Jesus' blessings are not just wishful thinking. Let us assume they are as real now as they were when he spoke those words to the crowds following his proclamation that the kingdom of God is near. "How near is it?" This is how near it is...

Recently I saw a husband speak very lovingly about his wife of 35 years who had just died after years of suffering. He was not alone. The community where they met, Alcoholics Anonymous, rallied around him, held him, supported him, 100 brothers and sisters. It was, in the midst of grief, a wonderful demonstration of love and support. He was very blessed. And Jesus' word came true: **"Blessed are those who mourn."**

I follow a group of former patients of a local doctor who lost his license after being accused of doling out pain medications to people who took advantage of his prescriptions. His substantial patient base feels that he was in many ways a wonderful doc who took time and care to help his clients and they have not left his side, fighting for his reinstatement for years now. They were planning to flood the courtroom in Norristown last Monday before the session was postponed. I agree with them, having been for a short time, a patient myself of that said doctor. I know he has a heart of gold, and I wish the authorities give him another chance. In the advocacy of these former patients, Jesus' word comes true: **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."**

Back in 1994, having just graduated from University, I had the opportunity to travel to Argentina to learn about a ministry there. As part of the two-week program we visited with the Mothers of the Plaza del Mayo. The women held up the memory of their sons who disappeared in the 1970's and 80's because they opposed the regime of the time. Thousands disappeared like that, were killed and thrown into the ocean from military planes, an atrocity. Twenty years later these women would not allow the powerful to forget. I understood then that these women were working for more than the memories of their own sons. And Jesus' word came true: **"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."**

Over the twelve years or so when we had au-pairs living with us while my wife ran her business, there were two au-pairs, two of our favorites I would say, who always seemed to go above and beyond. You could ask them anything and they would do it. And in a way you always worried about them, because they appeared more vulnerable. Someone might take advantage of them. But they were fine and they taught us a lot. And Jesus' word came true: **"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."** (I would add, the meek are the only people I would entrust the earth to...)

If you have some time (you all have lots of time to spare, I know!) think about how your life has already been blessed by those whom Jesus calls blessed in these eight Beatitudes. I guarantee you, you will find an astonishing richness of godliness that you have received not from great spiritual masters, not from folks who walk on water, but from people as spiritually poor and wanting as you and me. Isn't that something? And it's just the beginning of the Good News Jesus wanted us to hear - to change our perspective, to help us see all the people who are already blessed, who already bring blessings to the world. Many of them are among us this morning. And to all of you, Christ says, "You are blessed!" **Amen.**