

## Epiphany 4A 2017 Sermon

Matthew 5:1-12 *When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them...”

I had never made the connection before; but it’s right there in front of us: Jesus *sees* the crowds, and that **seeing** causes him to withdraw up a mountain<sup>1</sup> with his new disciples (whom he had just called a few verses earlier).

What has he *seen* in the crowds that occasions this need to withdraw and teach his new disciples?

I think we can reason from the context of the Beatitudes that what he has seen in the crowds are those who are poor in spirit; who are mourning; who are meek; who hunger and thirst for righteousness because they have been treated unjustly. Jesus sees all of this, and in it all he sees people who are loved and blessed by God. “Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are they who mourn...”

But how *is* it that Jesus sees these things in the crowds? And why is *what* he sees and *how* he sees so important that he immediately withdraws to the mountain and teaches his new disciples how to see as he does?

The 12<sup>th</sup> Century monk Hugh of St. Victor spoke of our having 3 eyes: the eye of the flesh, which sees outward appearances; the eye of the mind, which evaluates people, most often using social categories; and the eye of the soul, which sees people in relationship to God<sup>2</sup> – sees them the way Christ sees them.

Now, most all of us are skilled at seeing with the eye of the flesh – seeing outward appearances. And most all of us are also skilled at seeing with the eye of the mind: we quickly and easily evaluate people according to social categories.

What we are NOT very good at, however, is seeing with the eye of the soul: seeing people as Christ sees them. And *this*, I am convinced, is what Jesus desperately wants to teach his fledgling disciples, to prepare them for all that is to come: he wants to teach them how to see with the eye of the soul, see with God's eyes, and to recognize blessedness in the midst of ordinary, suffering humanity. This is Discipleship 101: how to see beyond what the eye of the mind can see, with all its evaluating and judging, and begin to see with the eye of the soul, which sees the presence of God in all people and all things.

This kind of seeing with the eye of the soul was particularly difficult for people like Jesus' disciples, who grew up in a culture that taught that God's blessing on a person was evidenced by how successful and prosperous they were. For that was, in fact, the dominant understanding of the Hebrew Bible – that the reward for being faithful to God was material prosperity: *more* land, *more* sheep, *more* crops, *more* wives, children, servants, etc. The fact that Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, David, Solomon and others end up quite wealthy is a sign in the Hebrew Bible that God *favours* them. Poverty, illness, or handicaps, however, were clear signs that God was NOT pleased with you. In John's Gospel [9:2], Jesus' disciples, upon meeting a man who had been blind from birth, ask Jesus, "Who sinned – this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" They are only reflecting the dominant view that **good** fortune is a sign of God's *favor*, whereas **bad** fortune is a sign of God's displeasure. (That "prosperity Gospel" is still preached by some today...) But Jesus clearly disavows that understanding of sickness and poverty as signs of God's disfavor (John 9:3). In fact, as Episcopal monk Curtis Almquist points out, "in the **New** Testament... now it is *adversity* that becomes the touchstone for blessing... Blessing amidst adversity. And surely this has something to do with the cross of Christ [as we read in today's Epistle]... Jesus promises to give us life, abundant life, [but] the context in which he speaks presumes the inevitability of the cross, which he shares with us – doesn't *spare* us but shares with us."<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, however, I think we Christians can be like those disciples who *looked down upon* the blind man in John's Gospel; for we, too, can look at those less fortunate in our world today and think that we are somehow superior to them, that **we** have *earned* the privileged place we have in society, even somehow deserve having been born in the richest, most powerful nation on earth, rather than in war-torn Syria or the slums of Calcutta. And so it is difficult for *us*, too, to truly hear and understand these Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit. (Or in Luke's version, 'Blessed are you who are poor,' period. – Lk 6:20) Blessed are those who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness..."

"In today's gospel lesson," Brother Almquist notes, "we hear of Jesus' promise that God's favor, God's care, God's provision, God's love can be known in the best of times **and** in the worst of times... which you can probably best understand if you've been there. If you have been to the brink of life, if you... have cried out to God like Jesus did from the cross, 'Why O why have you forsaken me?' and

then miraculously lived to tell the story, then you probably know something about that mystery of blessing that can come in the greatest of adversities.”<sup>3</sup>

I know it has been true in my own life. **The** most powerful experience of God I have ever had came out of one of the worst, most *traumatic* experiences of my life. Speak with some of our Laundry Love hosts and they will tell you about the blessings that they receive from our guests – people who are struggling with problems we can’t begin to imagine, yet who radiate the grace and love of God and bless us immeasurably. For a moment, at least, we see these people the way Jesus saw the crowds in today’s Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

St. Paul writes to the Colossians (and I read from *The Message* translation): “There’s a lot of suffering to be entered into in this world—the kind of suffering Christ takes on. I welcome the chance to take my share in the church’s part of that suffering.”<sup>4</sup> I think everyone who hosts at Laundry Love would agree: We welcome the chance to take our share in the church’s part of the suffering to be entered into in this world. And there is a *lot* of suffering, my friends, to be entered into in this world! People driven out of their homes and countries by unspeakable wars, starvation, persecution. People in parts of the world dying from very treatable diseases, or from malnutrition. People in our own community who are homeless or can’t afford the medications they need or the formula their babies need, so they go without.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

It is a radically different value system than that of the world we live in, my friends. But we who follow Jesus should be familiar with the pattern of Jesus turning this world’s values upside down. For we follow a Lord who taught, “Whoever would save their life must lose it, and whoever loses their life will save it.” We follow a Lord who, as St. Mary sings, “has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant... has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts... has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly... has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”<sup>5</sup> We follow a Lord who, as St. Paul says, “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... humbled himself...” to the point of death on a cross.<sup>6</sup>

And how upside-down was the life and teaching of St. Paul, who wrote in today’s Epistle, “God **chose** what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God **chose** what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God **chose** what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that **no** one might boast in the presence of God.” In today’s **Old** Testament lesson, the prophet Micah anticipates the Beatitudes when he asks: “what does

the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

In last week's sermon on Christian Unity, I quoted St. Paul, who wrote: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." I said in that sermon that the mind that was in Christ Jesus was characterized by a longing for unity in the Body of Christ, the Church. In today's Gospel, we see that the mind that was in Christ Jesus is the mind of the Beatitudes, a mind which held to what St. John Paul II and others have called the "preferential option for the poor."<sup>7</sup> My friends, on this day when we gather together as a church family, let us reaffirm our *principal* identity as **Christ's Body in this world**, having the mind of Christ, the love of Christ, the courage and determination of Christ in the face of a world which holds to very **different** values. For I am convinced that there has never been a time in *my* lifetime when the Church of Jesus Christ has been more desperately needed: a Church which witnesses to a divided world the fundamental unity we share in one body, one Spirit (Eph. 4:6); a Church that lives out the radical mercy, compassion, and love expressed in the Beatitudes of Jesus and the rest of his Sermon on the Mount, which follows; a Church that shares his cross "mid toil and tribulation,"<sup>8</sup> pouring out its life for the sake of the whole world.

So, my fellow members of the Body of Christ in this place, let me end with a prayer that comes from the hymn we will sing at the end of our meeting today. Let us pray:

Lord, you give the great commission:  
 "Heal the sick and preach the word."  
 Lest the Church neglect its mission  
 and the Gospel go unheard,  
 help us witness to your purpose  
 with renewed integrity;  
 with the Spirit's gifts empower us  
 for the work of ministry.<sup>9</sup>

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> Compare Matthew 9:36: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

<sup>2</sup> John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 67

<sup>3</sup> <http://ssje.org/ssje/2004/02/15/we-are-blessed-and-we-are-a-blessing/>

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 1:24, *The Message*

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:48-53

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:7-8

<sup>7</sup> Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus annus* (1991) elaborates on this principle, declaring it "not limited to material poverty but encompasses cultural and spiritual poverty as well."<sup>51</sup>

- <sup>8</sup> from the hymn, “The Church’s One Foundation” by Samuel John Stone, 1866
- <sup>9</sup> Bishop Jeffery Rowthorn, Hymnal 1982 #528