

Epiphany 6C 2019 Sermon

Luke 6:12-13, 17-26

...[Jesus] went up a mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer before God.¹ And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles... Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

*"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*"Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.*

*"Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets."

*"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.*

*"Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.*

*"Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

Jesus' "Beatitudes" – "Blessed are you who are poor... Blessed are you who are hungry..." etc. – are found both in his Sermon on the *Mount* in **Matthew's** Gospel² and, in different form, in his Sermon on the *Plain* in **Luke's** Gospel – our passage today. The Beatitudes are so counter-intuitive from the perspective of **this** world's values and mindset that they are a source of endless discussion, discovery, and treasure for those who choose to engage them. But because they are both difficult to **understand** and difficult to put into **practice**, many Christians tend to ignore them. Yet in many ways, the Beatitudes compress the whole Gospel message into succinct, concentrated, and memorable words; and to ignore them is to lose a central piece of the often-challenging Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

Now, since there is no way a preacher can unearth all the treasures found in the Beatitudes in one sermon (or in a thousand sermons, for that matter!), I will limit my scope today to just two things: First, I will offer an overall interpretive lens;

and secondly, I will mention some insights on the Beatitudes from two spiritual teachers, insights that I hope you will find helpful and thought-provoking.

I started reading today's Gospel passage a few verses *before* what is printed in your bulletin because I think that those verses set the scene for what follows. Luke tells us, "[Jesus] went up a mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer before God."¹ Now, when one spends a whole night steeped in prayer in the presence of God, something happens: one's ego-self diminishes, and one's consciousness, one's values, one's mindset become more and more like the consciousness and values and mindset of God. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is seen praying more often than in all the other three Gospels combined.¹ Over and over again, Jesus takes the time to pray, to be in God's presence, where he is renewed in God's consciousness, values, and mindset. (And if **Jesus** needed to be renewed in God's consciousness, values, and mindset, how much *more* do you and I?)

Having prayed all night long on top of the mountain, Jesus, at daybreak, calls his disciples and appoints 12 of them as his apostles. He then descends from the mountain, *with* his disciples, to a level place where crowds of people from "all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon" [foreigners] all swarm around him. And from that reservoir of strength he received from praying all night in God's presence, "power comes out from him and heals all of them."

But then Jesus turns *away* from the **crowds** and directs his attention to his **disciples**, and begins to teach them. Now, a few Sundays ago we read about Jesus' rejection in his hometown of Nazareth, where Jesus said, "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown"³ – Jesus seeing himself in the role of a prophet. That prophetic spirit is clearly seen in the blessings and woes of today's Gospel passage. Fr. John Shea writes: "The... consciousness reflected in the blessings and woes is very much in the prophetic tradition. Although Jesus is *more* than a prophet, he shares the unyielding prophetic sensitivity to the discrepancy between **God's vision** for human life and the way humans are actually living. It is this discrepancy that drives the blessings and woes."⁴ My friends, if we can see what Jesus is saying in today's Gospel through **that** interpretive lens, I believe we can make sense of what seems on the surface to be a profoundly counter-intuitive teaching: The blessings and woes speak to the discrepancy between **God's vision** for human life and the way humans are actually living.

Simply stated, the present world and **its** values is out of sync with **God** and God's *divine* values.⁴ What is it that our present world values? I think it fair to say that we value power and control over weakness and vulnerability. We value winning over losing; being first rather than second. We admire people who have been successful financially and professionally, and we tend to look down on those who have to scrape to get by or must rely on assistance. We tend to look at the world in dualistic terms: Right/wrong, good/bad, black/white, Republican/Democrat,

citizen/foreigner, Christian/Muslim, attractive/unattractive, gay/straight – and on and on.

Now, if we contrast these values and characteristics of our present world with the values and characteristics reflected in the mindset and teachings of Jesus, we can see why the Beatitudes seem so counter-intuitive to the mindset of this world and the way humans are actually living.

“...[T]he way the **world** judges success and failure or happiness and despair is neither normative nor lasting,” writes Fr. John Shea. “[The world’s values and] judgments are not normative because they do not coincide with the *ultimate* intentions of **God's** will. They are not lasting because [they are not] built on the rock of spiritual truth...”⁴

Fr. Shea points out that in his 1st Letter to Timothy, St. Paul writes: “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not... to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share... *so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.*”⁴ (1 Tim. 6:17) So that they may take hold of the life that really *is* life.

And this “life that really is life” is life lived within the mindset and consciousness of Christ, life lived in the kingdom of God which is already being manifested on earth as in heaven.

In what I have come to consider one of the most important passages of the whole Bible, St. Paul writes, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”⁵ My friends, **this** is the mind of Christ, the consciousness of Christ: it involves *emptying* ourselves – emptying ourselves of our egos, our False Selves, our inordinate attachments to the kingdom of this world and its many “things,” so that we might be filled with the mind and consciousness of Christ, and live within the kingdom of God here and now, as well as in the life to come. I believe that this is the thrust behind the Beatitudes.

Later in Luke, Jesus will say, “Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and God will give you everything you need.” (Luke 12:31, NLT) Or as *The Message* translation puts it, “Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions... You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.”

This is not to say that if you “take hold of the life that really is life,” God will necessarily make you rich, or will keep you from hunger or sorrow or persecution. Rather, because the “life that really is life” is deeper and more genuine than the surface life lived according to this world’s values and possessions, “the life that really is life” “can *coexist* with hunger, mourning, weeping, and persecution.”

(John Shea) And this “life that really is life” will, in the end, “**outlast** the negative social situations”⁶ of being poor or hungry or persecuted.

In summary, I think the overall message permeating today’s Gospel could be succinctly stated: Seek first the kingdom of God – the “life that is truly life.” Empty yourself of the counterfeit, surface life based solely on the norms and values and things of this world – a world which tends **not** to bless the poor, the hungry, those who are grieving impossible situations, those persecuted because of race, nationality, socio-economic status, or what have you.

And now, before I close, I’d like to share two insights on this Gospel passage from spiritual teachers whom I greatly admire.

Richard Rohr notes that those suffering poverty, or hunger, or loss, or being reviled or hated or excluded can be considered blessed because these things may be some of the only things powerful enough to displace our self-satisfied egos from the thrones of our lives, allowing our True Selves, who we really are in God, to emerge. “The offering of your broken self,” Fr. Rohr writes, “is what the Gospel is about, not the offering of your lily-white purity. The real nature of spiritual power is at the bottom, rather than the top; more at the edge than at the center; in right *relationship* rather than in *being* right.... The Spirit is best known not in comfort and prosperity, but in pain and suffering – for these are the only things strong enough to destabilize the ego.”⁷

The other insight I’d like to share comes from the spiritual teacher and author Henri Nouwen. Commenting on Jesus’ statement to his disciples, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,” Fr. Nouwen writes: “We need to focus on the poor, *not* primarily because the **poor** need *us*, but because **we** need the *poor*. Jesus says: ‘Blessed are the poor.’ He does not say: ‘Blessed are those who care for the poor.’ The poor are holding a blessing for us that we need to receive.”⁸

And what is that blessing? Nothing less than themselves, and the kingdom of God which, Jesus says, is theirs.

AMEN

1 “before God” is from *The Message* translation

2 Matthew 5:1-11

3 Luke 4:24

4 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 44

5 Philippians 2:5-7

6 Shea, *ibid.*, p. 45

7 *citation lost*

8 from Nouwen, Henri, *Love, Henri: Letters on the Spiritual Life*