

6th Sunday after Epiphany  
Church of the Advent  
February 17, 2019

## **Blessed Are**

This morning we follow the disciples into the mountains to hear Jesus preach a sermon. This familiar section of this gospel has been called *The Sermon on the Mount* (from the gospel of Matthew, because he describes them climbing *up*), or *The Sermon on the Plain* in Luke (because he describes them descending *down* the mountain), or *The Beatitudes* (because it is a descriptive of the list of *Blessed Are's*). In any case this passage captures Jesus teaching in a radical and counter-cultural way, without stories or parables or riddles, about how God would love for us to live in this world.

Most of the people in the crowd who came to the mountains to hear Jesus had not really come there for a lesson; rather they had walked the distance from their work and their homes for the healing miracles, looking for that power they had heard about in Jesus that could get rid of the unclean spirits and disease that made their lives miserable. This very personal and particular want and need for healing was the likely draw that brought each person into the crowd that formed and followed Jesus around

each local town and beyond. I guess some could have just been bored and looking for a little excitement, or wanting to settle a bet with a neighbor about what this man from Nazareth could really do, but I would be willing to bet that there was something inside each of them that sent them seeking for what they could not even name, something beyond the day to day life they knew and accepted. Most of them would likely have qualified as those poor, mourning, meek, and hungry Jesus spoke of, but they were used to that. They would not have personally known many people who could be called rich, fat and happy--unless they worked for them. Certainly the well-off would not have wanted to waste their valuable time joining crowds of the general population to hear a stranger tell them that a time would come when the world would be turned upside down, and all that *they* had accumulated would be lost, even as the poor were satisfied.

Nevertheless, curiosity and longing for personal healing aside, what the people who gathered there got was a sermon, and a really different kind of sermon. It is likely that they were used to being preached at in the synagogue about the rules, for rules are how a society is ordered. Rules can be good things. In a general sense, most rules and laws are meant to keep us from operating out of pure self-interest, and from descending into

anarchy and chaos, and it is lovely when some rules are followed: throw your trash in a trash can; pick up after your dog; drive on the right side of the road--unless you are in Great Britain; don't lie, cheat or steal what belongs to another. Don't kill each other--figuratively or literally. Don't be wasteful and try to recycle what you can.

Known to the people in Palestine as The Law, the rules of their time were thought to have come from God, beginning with The Ten Commandments offered by God through Moses. The Law was meant to be a guide to help the Israelites follow the greatest commandment: to love their neighbors as themselves; but over time, The Law had evolved into chapters full of lists that controlled their lives: wash your hands, don't eat meat and milk from the same dishes, don't cut your hair, don't talk to Samaritans, bring your money to the temple to pay for the required sacrifices, don't pick grain on the Sabbath, even if you are hungry and that is all there is to eat.

Most rules have been created throughout human history by those who have *more* than others, to keep and secure their *more*: no food or medical care without money; stay on your side of the fence or border; ride in the

back of the bus. There have been rules that allowed human beings to be treated as property, bought and sold and abused and put to use as others saw fit. Rules meant to protect some from perceived threat of others to a way of life that had become familiar and normative: about who can use which bathrooms and drinking fountains; about where you were allowed to live, or who you could marry.

Jesus seems here on the mountain to be throwing some of the rules out right on their heads. Blessed are the hungry, the poor, the weeping, the hated, the excluded, the reviled, and the defamed, for the Good News is that God sees their suffering and will make things right in God's kingdom. Woe to the full, the rich, the laughing and those who are spoken well of, for nothing more would be coming to them who have already had it all--usually at the expense of others.

In our 10 am Adult Sunday School class we recently spent a few weeks talking about Matthew's version of the Beatitudes. Some of the questions we pondered were, "What does it mean to be blessed for being *meeek*? That is a word in American English that conjures up images of weakness, cowardice, reluctance to step forward, being wimpy, timid, resigned or

submissive--certainly not good old American values. Jesus speaks of the meek as gentle, peaceful, unassuming, and unpretentious. It is certainly inside out from the usual thinking for the world to be inherited by the meek, rather than to those our society admires: the strong, unyielding, never-quitting, winning accumulators of more than an even share.

Jesus was preaching extremes on that mountain, and on that plain, yet in some sense the underlying message is one that has something to do with balance. We do like to drag out that quip attributed to Jesus that "the poor will be with you always" to justify the world as we know it with its extremes of rich and poor. Because there is always someone richer and poorer than we are, we can easily forget that it takes one to make the other. The rich cannot be rich without the poor; the poor cannot be poor without the rich.

Perceiving ourselves always to be somewhere in the middle, it is tempting to accept things the way they are, and undervaluing our capacity for kingdom work. From the middle we can envy the rich, wanting to be just a little bit more like them even as we speak of them with disdain. And we can pity the poor, even as we scoff at their meekness, needing them to be

responsible for their own plight. From the middle we can offer gratitude to God for the comforts we have, and challenge ourselves to practice a comfortable generosity. Yet even from the comfortable middle, we find ourselves looking for that deep healing, seeking that honest forgiveness, following the crowd to hear what Jesus might have to say to fill the longing deep within us for something we cannot even name. Something *more* that cannot be met even by becoming rich. Something more that will free us from the oppression of our own blindness to the real suffering around us.

Blessed are the merciful; blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These Beatitudes from Matthew's gospel complete Luke's shorter list. Yet these three, speaking of mercy, peace and righteousness, offer us a path to find our way in a world turned upside down by Jesus, a path where it becomes our joy to discern the anxious lies of the powerful, and to alleviate the suffering of the oppressed, with whatever gifts we are given to do so. God calls us to be kingdom people, showing mercy, seeking justice and peace. God gives us what we need to follow Jesus on this kingdom path, and with every step he calls us *blessed*. Thanks be to God. Amen.