

February 2, 2020

4th Sunday after the Epiphany

Year A

Happiness and Righteous Living

By the end of Matthew Chapter Four, Jesus has been introduced. We see that he has the power to be what the gospel claims for him; everyone is being healed. In the text this week, we see this theology by story (narrative theology) being formalized.

He begins teaching like Moses on the mountain. We have here an echo of the giving of the Ten Commandments— and an unapologetic claim to Jesus' superiority over Moses. He sits like a Rabbi sat. His disciples come to him. Then he teaches.

At the end of this section of Matthew which begins with "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him," we find the words, "the crowds were astounded at his teaching, He taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes. When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him...." He is recognized, honored, and the crowds, appropriately, follow him. (7:28-8:1)

The reading for this week, which we call The Beatitudes (the blessings) could be approached as the "condensed version of the law" while the next chapters (5:13 – 7:28) could be read as fleshing things out in more detail, or as specific examples: " And whenever you pray...(6:5) This mirrors the pattern we see in the original narratives of the Ten Commandments.

How do we interpret these "commandments?" In the sayings about the pure in heart— for they will see God, and the peacemakers— who will be called children of God, we might see something which seems obvious enough. But the other blessings are completely unexpected: blessed are the poor in spirit!?

Could it be that Matthew, in pointing us to the Kingdom of Heaven, which is mentioned three times in the twelve verses of the beatitudes, is pointing us to the one unlimited thing: the love of God. Jesus' people understood that honor was limited in their word; we know its limitations and its tribal, scapegoatish abuses. And Jesus' people understood the damage of riches, that you cannot serve God and man, an

understanding we are finally having thrust upon us as the world falls apart.

God's love, the honor from God is not limited; not for those in ancient Palestine, nor for us now.

A few years ago, I watched a film called “The Secret” and it was all the rage. It purported to reveal an ancient principle that had enabled people for generations to achieve wealth, success and happiness. That principle was called the “Law of Attraction”: all you have to do to get everything you want in life is to simply believe that you will get it, envision your life with it, and speak about it as if it is a reality. This will then “attract” what you want into your life. The more we hear of hucksters like this, the more we tend to be skeptical that there is any such thing as a “secret to happiness.” But I would say that there is a “secret” to happiness that has been recognized throughout human history, and by most of the world’s major religions. The true secret to happiness is not to hold tightly to whatever it is you want and come up with all kinds of schemes for getting it. The true secret to happiness is to

let go what you want and accept life as it is. Call it what you will—trusting God, being enlightened, letting go—it is the true secret to happiness.

What does this have to do with our lessons for today? It seems to me that the qualities for living expressed in our Scripture readings today—justice, kindness, integrity, and humility—come from embracing this way of living. There is something about letting go our obsession with getting what we want and accepting what life brings us that opens us up to be able to enjoy the goodness all around us. And in turn it opens us up to relate to those around us with compassion—even those we may or may not “like.” When we can look at another human being—even one who may be an “enemy”—with compassion, we can let go all our fears and our preconceived notions, and just see a human being who is struggling to find happiness. We can be truly kind to those we see in that light, and we can also begin to care about their well-being, which means that we care about their peace and justice and we accept our calling to relate to them with integrity.

One of the reasons why this approach to living remains so elusive to us is that it requires that we accept the fact that we are broken people. We have to accept our basic vulnerability to life in order to let go and embrace life as it is. Most of us find this quite difficult, if not downright impossible. It requires that we experience some measure of brokenness—which is something most of us spend a lot of energy and effort trying to avoid. We have to encounter what Anne Lamott calls the “gift of failure.” Many of us may find that language strange, but failure is a gift in that it enables you to accept the humility of looking foolish, of being broken and flawed. In a very real sense, failure enables you to embrace the vulnerability of being human. And throughout the ages, many have recognized the profound wisdom that it is only through accepting our vulnerability that we find the path to peace, the path to blessedness, the path to life and true happiness.

I think this idea finds expression in our lessons most clearly in the Gospel reading Jesus’ “Beatitudes.” Many of us may have been raised to hear these verses as an outline of character traits that we as Christians

are called to embody. It may be that in a secondary way, but that is not the main point. The main point is that the Kingdom of God turns everything in this world upside down! “Blessed are the poor in spirit” first says that those whom society has deemed unfortunate are truly blessed in God’s realm. It says that those who have no reason in this world for hope or joy, those who have been deprived of their fair share of goodness and justice—these are the ones for whom God’s Kingdom and God’s justice and God’s peace are incredible gifts.

Part of what makes the Beatitudes so counter-intuitive is that Jesus pronounces God’s blessing on those who expose our vulnerability!

From that perspective, the secret to happiness—to open yourself and accept life as it is and then to live out of the compassion and integrity of that wholeness—may sound foolish. Our typical approach to life is that success or wealth or power equals happiness. The problem with that is that the more you succeed, the more wealth and power you gain, the more you have to lose, and therefore the more you relate to life in fear

and competition. This way of life leads us to think we can only be happy in life by winning, by beating someone else at the game.

As those who seek to follow Jesus Christ, we are called to embody a completely different vision of life. We are called to spend our lives working to extend God's mercy to the left out and beat down in this world, to seek to establish God's peace and God's justice for all the dispossessed and disenfranchised of this world. We are called to align our lives with those whom the world despises and rejects—which means that we too will be despised and rejected because of our commitment to God's mercy and peace and justice. But like those whom the world tramples, when we align our lives in that way we also can rejoice when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. As St. Paul says it, "God has chosen what is low and despised in the world" (1 Cor. 1:28).

We may not like those words, but we cannot avoid the truth they confront us with. The only way we can truly embody Jesus' vision of God's kingdom and God's justice and God's peace is by opening ourselves to accept life as it is and our own vulnerability to the pains and

losses and disappointments of life. It is only as we embrace life in this way that we can find true joy and can open ourselves enough to leave competition behind and instead relate to those around us in compassion and integrity.

May God grant us the courage to embark on that path of life—to walk in the light that our savior Jesus the Christ has brought to us, and so find the true secret to blessedness.

God Bless You.