

Epiphany 4, Year A
Matthew 5:1-12
January 29, 2017
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The collection of sayings known as the Beatitudes comes to us in two forms, Matthew's, which we just heard, and Luke's. Of the two Luke's is the more radical, for he does not "spiritualize" them, if that is the term. Luke tells us the "destitute" are blessed, not just the "poor in spirit," and it is the "hungry and thirsty," not just those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness" who will be filled. Either way they are remarkable enough, so remarkable that they have been identified as the touchstone of Christianity for two millennia.

The larger truth is - and I believe at some level we all know this - they really aren't the touchstone of Christianity, and never have been, just as the Jewish preacher to whom they are attributed realized they weren't the touchstone of Judaism, even though Judaism, like Christianity, is a religion of compassion, grace, mercy, and love. The reason for this is simple, they aren't the touchstone of humanity, they don't reflect the hopes and desires of people, and therefore do not reflect the actual practice of the religions most of us actually practice.

Both then and now the vast majority of us do not seek poverty, nor even the more vague poverty of spirit. We don't want to mourn; study after study has demonstrated the lengths we will go to in order to avoid feeling our deepest

grief. I am periodically amazed by the way I am shut down emotionally because I won't let myself mourn, and still I soldier on, aware at times that I don't to be aware. We don't want to be meek, we don't want to be hungry and thirsty, even again if that hunger and thirst is for righteousness. Although many of us do believe in being merciful, it comes in fits and starts, both individually and collectively. The human way of being a peacemaker quite often is to win the fight, not to reconcile enemies so completely they become friends. Certainly we don't want to be persecuted, we don't want to be reviled.

If this collection of sayings constitute the conditions under which people become particularly blessed, then for the most part they say "no thank you." Certainly I do, and I do it all the time and quite emphatically. I don't want to be blessed this way, I have not lived nearly sixty-three years - which is a lot to some of you, and barely out of childhood to others - in order to experience the world in the way the Beatitudes describe it. On the contrary, I have spent my life trying to avoid the conditions described here, and for the most part I have had some success. In those moments I have failed, I have felt most miserable and alone, most separate from God, in short, at these moments I have felt the least blessed. Truly, how many of us get fired from our job, face the loss of those we love the most, discover that we are being slandered by someone and respond to any or all of that with great thanksgiving for these manifold blessings of God? Not I, not many.

In fact one human way of understanding God's utility for people is that God is the one who makes sure that things don't go wrong for the truly faithful, and if they do go wrong God is the one people call upon to fix it. The most extreme version of this is of course the so-called "prosperity gospel" sort of preaching, but there are a variety of ways to express this perspective. In this view, which is a perfectly natural one that I have more than once found myself relying on, the blessed are the ones who aren't poor, sad, hungry, thirsty, persecuted or slandered, for these are signs that something is wrong between God and the faithful. The common response to these sorts of travails is to make an assumption either that God has abandoned us, or is conducting some sort of test, not that such a state constitutes a kind of blessing.

If therefore the Beatitudes are to be inspirational to us, or even useful in any way, most of us need to begin by admitting they do not describe the human attitude toward ourselves, or others, or God, and I am not even sure, as I once was, that they are guide posts showing us the way to the kingdom, as if somehow the closer we can get to this attitude and perspective the closer we are to God. That may be true, but it isn't all that useful because if they are guideposts most of us never got on that trail, and of the few who did, the majority got off it fairly quickly. I am convinced something else is going on.

Today I believe that the "something else" is something like this: The Beatitudes do not reflect the human attitude toward God and the world; the Beatitudes reflect the genuine and deep disjunction between humanity and God.

They show us just how much we want and need to rely on ourselves and how little we want to rely upon God. And as important, they show us that no matter what God will never give up on us, God will never abandon us, but is always and ever not just willing, but able to move our spirits even against our own best efforts.

Here is what I mean in practical terms. Jesus is telling us: "You won't believe this not because you are bad or stupid, but because you just can't believe it. But here is the truth; when every means by which you seek to control your environment, your destiny, your place, your power, your image, your security has failed, and failed utterly, then you will be ready to receive the life of God, and God will offer that life to you. When you are out of resources, when you don't know what to do next, when you discover that you are really feeling desperate, then you will be ready to receive the life of God, and God will offer that life to you."

The reason Jesus needs to say this is because for the most part most people really do rely upon themselves for their total sense of who they are and why they matter. As long as that works, everything is fine. As long as people can sustain a sense of self and value because of things they can control, or at least manage, then God is nice, but not necessary for a sense of self and a sense of value and purpose. Only when life stops working the way we all just know it is supposed to are we then truly and completely open to the sense of life that comes purely and freely and completely as gift from God and sign of God's presence.

It isn't that God needs to break us down in order to transform us by love. I don't think for a minute God is doing that. I believe rather than God is infinitely patient, willing to wait as long as it takes for free people, making free choices to discover that all the ways we show that we believe in ourselves and our own capacities, all the ways, that is, we seek to be the source of our own blessedness, have finally stopped working so that, in that moment we might discover the one sort of blessedness that really sustains, the blessedness that comes from being a child of God.

The way I am looking at the Beatitudes today, right now even, is that their primary purpose is two-fold. First, they show us how big the divide is between people and God. They show us the ways we all work hard to be the source of our own blessing by using a contrast that demonstrates how clearly we spend most of our waking hours trying to live in a way that avoids nearly everything Jesus describes today as blessed. Second, they do this not in a spirit of judgment or condemnation; rather, they do it in a spirit of boundless mercy, grace and love. For these Beatitudes declare as few other points in scripture, that when our efforts fail, when we are no longer able to be the source of our own sense of blessedness, when the world turns upon us in whatever way that happens, just then we are, if we but notice it, positioned as at no other moment in life, to recognize the one true source of all true blessedness, and that is God alone.

These Beatitudes are thus a promise of the faithfulness of God no matter what is happening. They are a promise of the nearness of God no matter how far

away we may imagine God to be. These Beatitudes are a promise of the love of God no matter how lonely, isolated and unloved we may feel. They do not declare that if we are but faithful and notice our blessedness in moments when life is not working that everything will end up exactly the way we first imagined it should. They declare instead that no matter how the exigencies of this life work out, we are ever held in the embrace of the God of all Creation.