

Sunday, January 29, 2023
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)

Micah 6.1-8; Matthew 5.1-12

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/422273526730972>

(Sermon begins at about 18:05)

“Blessedness”

The Gospel reading for today is a familiar one: the Beatitudes. The short and pithy sayings Jesus uses to describe who is truly blessed in the eyes of God. Matthew makes it clear in the verses immediately before today’s that the crowds Jesus attracted were not the elite and well-to-do, but those who were sick, who were afflicted with a variety of diseases. And the implication is that because of their following an itinerant preacher seeking healing, they were likely poor as well, unable to afford medical care. They were in search of divine blessing to heal them of whatever afflicted them, be it physical, emotional, spiritual, or economic. They wanted something that would help turn their lives around. While they received some positive affirmations for their plight, there was little to help them change their situations. So, Jesus’ words undoubtedly were met with mixed reactions by those he was addressing. As one commentator so eloquently puts it:

To the extent that his listeners are expecting Jesus to lay out an account of divine blessing that reveals how to get it and keep it, the Beatitudes come as a confounding surprise. In the first place, Jesus paints an utterly counterintuitive picture of blessedness: looking around the world, then and now, and it’s easy to conclude that the “blessed” are the rich, happy, strong, satisfied, ruthless, deceptive, aggressive, safe, and well-liked — and yet here’s Jesus, saying that despite appearances, the truly “blessed” are actually the poor, mourning, gentle, hungry, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaking, persecuted, and reviled.¹

Now certainly these affirmations would have provided some sort of comfort. But that and a quarter will get them a cup of coffee. How are they to obtain the healing and wholeness they desire, that they yearn for? Jesus will get to that later in his Sermon on the Mount, offering more practical instruction. What we hear today is just the opening of that sermon. The teaser to pique people’s curiosity, to keep them interested. We’ll just have to leave it here for now, because what we have to work with for our purposes is the Beatitudes themselves. To ferret out what they mean for us as modern-day followers of Jesus.

When we, in our modern time hear the Beatitudes, we may experience a variety of emotions. Certainly, compared to the original hearers of Jesus’ words, we are far better off. Most of us, at least in our own context, would not share a lot in common with those who sought out Jesus on that mountain. Most of us are not among the poor and destitute—and if we are, we have social service agencies to help. Most of us are not among the sick and infirm who have nowhere else to turn for healing—most of us have access to some sort of health care services. So, for us, we might feel a twinge of concern, maybe even guilt. If this is how Jesus defines blessedness, how

can we ever hope to be blessed, when we have so much going for us already? And how do we become blessed given the conditions Jesus lays out?

But there's the rub. The Beatitudes are not meant to be a guide, a "how to" manual for how to achieve blessedness in our lives, how to get to a place of being blessed in the eyes of God. Jesus is not suggesting that we become poor, be it in spirit or economically, or any other way, just to experience blessedness. Jesus is not suggesting that we purposefully mourn or be intentionally sorrowful as a means to blessedness. Jesus is not suggesting we seek out persecution as a way of experiencing blessedness. Rather, Jesus is seeking to deliver good news to those who already are poor or sorrowful or persecuted; to provide good news to those who may find themselves in similar situations down the road. What he is saying is that even though the world may not regard such people as blessed, things are different in God's kingdom. In that divine economy, these are the ones who are truly blessed precisely because of what they have had to endure, through no fault of their own. But blessedness is not a zero-sum game. That does not mean those of us who do not fit in any of the categories Jesus identifies are not also blessed. We're just blessed for other reasons, which do not happen to be the subject of this particular set of teachings by Jesus. So the upshot is that in the Beatitudes, Jesus is describing the realities of the world—that there is indeed such things as poverty, illness, and persecution. And then providing hope for the coming of the kingdom in which such things will be turned upside down and all things will be made new. As such, Jesus is not issuing any sort of instructions on what one needs to do to achieve blessedness. That is purely a gift from God, bestowed on all God's beloveds. ALL God's beloveds.

There is an implied, unwritten—or unspoken—message in what Jesus preaches in the Beatitudes. In what he is implying about all things being turned upside down and being made new in God's kingdom. The kingdom that is already and not yet. The kingdom that has begun to be manifest through the coming of Christ into the world, but will not be fully realized until his return. And that has to do with response. How do we, in our own time, respond to those in our midst who are among those God considers the truly blessed whereas our society does not? How do we—those who are blessed in other ways—use our blessedness to relieve the pain and suffering of others? If there is any instruction involved in the Beatitudes, it is the implication that those of us who are not among those identified in the Beatitudes—those of us who are blessed with the resources and ability to do so—are called to help alleviate and improve the situation of those who are identified in the Beatitudes. That in our ability to do so, we are, if anything, contributing to the blessing of those who are infirm or poor or persecuted. That they are doubly blessed. Through God's concern for the least of these, and through our work to help relieve the suffering and improve the lives of those so afflicted.

We know that Jesus talks about this elsewhere. Particularly in his commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. This commandment to love our neighbors—and any of the commandments, for that matter—are not transactional. They are not a means of acquiring or securing God's blessing. Rather, living according to these commandments is our response to the blessedness we experience in our own lives. That we recognize how blessed we are and seek to express our gratitude by seeking to share our blessedness with others. That's how those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are persecuted, experience their own

blessedness. In many ways, Jesus is expounding on the core teachings of the Jewish tradition, such as those of the Prophet Micah.

In our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Micah, “Micah, too, makes a case that human behavior is properly responsive to divine blessing, as opposed to a means to acquire it.”² Since we don’t talk about Micah as much as we do Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, and Ezekiel, it might help to provide a little context. Micah was a prophet who lived in Judah in the eighth century BC and was a contemporary of the more well-known prophet Isaiah. This was a time of major political and socio-economic upheaval in Israel. Of particular concern at that time was the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Sound familiar? As a result, Micah was concerned with justice—largely economic justice—and the corruption among the people, particularly the political and religious authorities who turned a blind eye, even contributed to, these conditions. The oracle we hear today is a part of God’s condemnation of the nation for not adhering to the covenant established between God and Israel. In this oracle, this is in the form of God taking Israel to metaphorical court, where God plays the part of both prosecutor and judge. In today’s reading, he lays out his case against Israel. Part of what is implied is that there is a disconnect between what the people profess in their acts of worship and what they actually do: “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

God concludes by noting that these acts of worship, viewed by the people as a means of appeasing God and of seeking forgiveness for their failings is not what is important to God. Rather, as the Prophet notes, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” In this—what is probably the most well-known quote from Micah—the Prophet, speaking for God, is getting back to basics. To what is truly important to God. And clearly identifying what people need to do to live out their faith.

First, that we are “to do justice.” Being concerned with the fair and equitable treatment of all people. As our Baptismal covenant puts it, to “respect the dignity of every human being,” recognizing that we are all God’s beloved children. Second, that we are “to love kindness.” That we demonstrate love and compassion in all our interactions. Particularly to those who are like those identified in the Beatitudes. And third, that we are “to walk humbly with your God.” Although a better and more accurate translation is “to walk wisely with your God.”³ Which is a little cryptic, but in this context, implies living our lives guided by God’s commandments and in accordance with God’s purposes. What the ancients would refer to as righteousness—right living.

This is the root of blessedness. “To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” The root of our being blessed and our response to being blessed. None of this is particularly earth-shattering. Well, maybe it is, placed in the context of our secular society. But as people of faith, we know all these things. This is the root of what it means to be children of God and followers of Jesus Christ. Always to be concerned with what is of concern to our God. Not because we have to do these things in order to achieve God’s love or secure God’s blessing.

Those things are already granted. Those things are already secured. Those things are already and irrevocably ours. Admittedly, sometimes we forget; which is why we need reminders. Like God, through the Prophet Micah, reminded the people of Israel. Like Jesus, through the Beatitudes and the Great Commandment, reminded—and continually reminds—his followers. Ongoing reminders of our own blessedness. And an implied invitation to respond accordingly.

As one of my currently favorite commentators sums up the purpose of such passages as the Beatitudes and the teachings of the Prophets: “if we distort the beatitudes into duties, or worse, into a supposed method for acquiring divine blessing, we’ll miss Jesus’ primary point. God’s blessings are already among us, surprising and counterintuitive, gracious and undeserved, world-turning and beautiful, and we’re called to live lives that are responsive to those blessings at every turn.”⁴ And in living lives that are responsive to those blessings, we have the privilege and the opportunity to be a blessing to others.

¹ “Blessing First: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany 4,” SALT, January 25, 2023.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/1/28/blessing-first-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-4>.

² Ibid.

³ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1311.

⁴ “Blessing First.”