

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

January 29, 2023

Micah 6:1-8

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

Psalm 15

The Rev. Nat Johnson

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted. Blessed are those who are reviled on account of Jesus and his proclamation that the reign of God has come near.

Our gospel reading this morning is one of Matthew’s more famous texts. Over the years, they have been pulled from their scriptural context to adorn hallmark greeting cards, cross-stitch patterns, and decorative plaques as pithy statements of comfort or ideals that shape and motivate our interior lives. But this isolation from their original context and their source has emptied them of their power and, in turn, left us with a rather flimsy understanding of their significance for the kind of salvation that Jesus offers.

In our contemporary moment, particularly for those of us who are in the dominant sides of power structures, it can be difficult to grasp the radical nature of this salvation. In the West, and especially here in the U.S., we have a tendency to spiritualize and privatize the notion of salvation. It has become entangled in the Protestant work ethic that pulses through our nation’s veins, contributing to the falsehood that “God helps those who help themselves.” We have made salvation a story of self-reliance and self-preservation, something that we earn or establish for ourselves.

The Beatitudes form the introductory remarks to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. Literarily, the Sermon on the Mount acts as Jesus’ manifesto, his description of, and summons to, the kind of life that characterizes the kingdom that Jesus has come to proclaim. It is difficult to recapture just how startling these words would have been to hear because they have become so familiar to us. But Jesus’ words completely destabilize and upend the categories of blessedness, of righteousness and piety, of integrity and right relationship with God. The way of God’s kingdom will not operate like the kingdoms of this world – the normal structures of power and dominance, of violence and intimidation, are not compatible with the vision that God has for all that God has created. Those who are wealthy, healthy, and powerful will not be extolled as the epitome of blessedness and righteousness. What Jesus proclaims stands in stark contrast to the mindset of the privileged who see their material wealth and health as an indication of God’s favor.

Matthew is often accused of “spiritualizing” the categories of poverty, mourning, and hunger, particular when compared to Luke’s version of this sermon. But I suspect that this accusation arises more from the history of interpretation than from Matthew himself, and that often, it is the result of divorcing Jesus’ sayings from his own life and work. We cannot understand Jesus’ sermon apart from him, from his identity as the Beloved of God, from his life and ministry. Nor can we understand the sermon if we start with an understanding of the beatitudes as instructions, commands, or spiritual to-do’s. Jesus is not laying out a path to blessing in his sermon. Rather, Jesus is describing the alternative world order established by the reign of God that has come near.

The Beatitudes were a proclamation of hope for the crowds who were experiencing various kinds of oppression within the power structures of imperial rule. They promise God's salvation, not as a reward for enduring suffering but as a sign of God's presence and activity in this world. The salvation that God offers is not a spiritual category disconnected from the trials and tribulations of this life, but an all-encompassing gift intended to liberate humankind from the cycles of violence and oppression that we are so prone to create as a means of protection and security.

Many of us here today do not understand the kind of oppression that Jesus' listeners experienced. Our notion of "persecution" has been limited to a kind of infringement on our personal and private convictions and ideals.

Many of us do not know the weight of imperial rule, we do not experience the systemic injustices of a depraved world-order that criminalizes poverty and refuses the status of "human" to those who fall outside the bounds of white-heteronormativity. We do not experience degradation of personhood due to lack of basic necessities. We do not carry in our bodies the fear and collective traumas of a people at the mercy of the powerful. And so, it can be difficult for us to grasp just how radical the hope is that Jesus offers.

What might the Beatitudes have to offer us, then? What word is Jesus speaking to those of us whose privilege protects us from persecution and oppression that the poor, the meek, and the hungry experience? To answer these questions, it is imperative for us to understand who, exactly, Jesus is naming as blessed. The poor in spirit, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – these are not the spiritually impoverished or those who would seek a higher holiness through pious practices; rather, they are those worn down by the weight of poverty, who struggle for basic survival and long for the safety of God's righteousness to fill the world. The merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers are not marks of the spiritually mature who simply avoid conflict; rather, they are those who recognize the disparity and inequity of the world and respond by giving of themselves and their resources to care for the outcasts of society, who embody the compassion and mercy of God.

Perhaps the most misunderstood of the blessed are those who mourn. We often associate mourning with the grief of loss and sorrow. But Matthew intends us to understand "mourning" in a much more nuanced and robust way. The blessed who mourn are those who see the disparity between the way the world is and the promises of God's reign, who recognize the layers of injustice that permeates the systems and structures that govern our lives. This one hits me hardest today in the wake of more mass shootings over the last several weeks, after the release of the horrific footage of the gross misconduct of the police officers who murdered Tyre Nichols. "Blessed on are those who mourn," Jesus says, "for they will be comforted."

The word that our English versions of the bible translate as "comforted" is rooted in the same word that we see in the description of the Holy Spirit as the "comforter" offered by John in his Gospel. But "comfort" here is not about sympathy, it is not about making us feel better. Rather, it has the connotation of "advocacy." Those who mourn will be advocated on behalf of, and it is in this statement that we see the implications of these proclamations for us. We are bid to follow the way of Jesus as advocates for those whom God honors, to use our privilege and power to confront the systems that perpetuate the conditions that lead to poverty and violence and mourning.

To be clear, this is not an invitation to dole out salvation to the "less fortunate." The call to advocacy is not saviorism. Salvation is not ours to offer or give or even claim for ourselves. Salvation is

God's alone. But we are bid to enter into it, to appropriate it and manifest it in our lives and in the way we engage the destitute in our midst. This is a call and invitation to stand in solidarity with the very people that the systems and institutions of our world attempt to erase, control, and oppress. This is a call to center the experience of those who bear the weight of our sin and to actively confront the policies and circumstances that lead to their marginalization.

We must fight the urge to keep this word spoken to us in the realm of the theoretical. It is a word that summons us to engage our minds and bodies, our resources and our energy to stand alongside the poor and afflicted. It bids us to resist the domestication and taming of Jesus' teaching, to let go of the strategies we develop to release us from the radical nature of discipleship that Jesus describes in his sermon. Peace will not be found by avoiding the weight of Jesus' words. Rather, peace is found when we embody – in all of our relationships – the wholeness that comes through liberation and justice, by enacting God's reign in every aspect of our lives, in every engagement we have with the world. Peace is established not in the absence of conflict but in our active resistance against the powers that hinder the wholeness and wellbeing that God intends for humanity, for all of creation.

May God give us the grace and perseverance to see the blessed among us that we might learn more deeply and more truly the kind of life God desires for us. Amen.