

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, Year A, Matthew 5:1-12, 1 Corinthians 1:18
February 2, 2020

It was not a mistake. I meant for the gospel text in the bulletin to be different than the gospel read this morning. It is the same passage, most frequently referred to as the Beatitudes. The version read are the words most familiar to Christians Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, and the version in the bulletin is an interpretation of these Beatitudes by Eugene Peterson, author of the popular rendition of the Bible, the Message. Peterson's work interprets Scripture into accessible language; sometimes when we hear a familiar Scripture, we tune it out and need new language to break its meaning open.

The Beatitudes were first heard in a very different climate than our own. Suffering and struggle not only was the norm but was considered to be essentially what life was. Children dying was normal. Parents dying and leaving children orphaned, fending for themselves was normal. You lived, you worked, you died. People didn't seek their bliss or how to make the most of this one precious life. As the 1st Noble Truth in Buddhism identifies, life is suffering. Nobody in the ancient world actually expected to be happy, except the very rich & powerful. For everyone else, tragedy was the defining feature of life and survival the best you could hope for.

Against this backdrop comes Jesus' teaching of the Beatitudes that promises a blessing linked to the suffering of poverty, mourning, hungering for justice, and persecution. The blessing is a deeper reliance on God. The blessing is a deeper connection to God when those things that give false, temporary security and identity are taken away. Life is suffering and blessing. That is good news when you think life is mostly suffering.

Against this same backdrop comes the message of the cross. It is a precursor to resurrection. Suffering is a precursor to new life. That message was foolishness to the people of the time, as Paul says, not because they didn't believe in the reality of the cross but because they didn't believe in the reality of the resurrection.

Fast forward to our present time and the message of the Beatitudes and the cross are heard against a different backdrop. With all the advances in modern medicine and technology that have improved the basics of living, the idea that life is suffering is appalling. Suffering and struggle is a part of life, but it isn't life; it doesn't define life. Life is really meant to be a blessing. It may come with an unwelcome side dish of struggle, but the main event is the blessing. We are meant to find what it brings us and others joy. You only have this one precious life. Today the message of the cross – that God transforms suffering into new life – is foolishness not because people don't believe in the resurrection but because they don't believe in the reality of the cross. The cross isn't an anomaly in living; it is as part of it as the blessing. The cross and the blessing are linked together – it is as foolish sounding today as it was 2000 years ago but for completely different reasons.

The Beatitudes against a world that expects life to be a blessing and minimizes the reality of suffering, the Beatitudes are actually pretty hard to hear. They do not add blessing to struggle, but add struggle to blessing. We want to be filled without being hungry. We want to see God without the inner work of cultivating purity of heart. We want the kingdom of God without the persecution. At least I do.

I have a colleague whose church is linked with an Episcopal school – one of those Episcopal schools whose tuition is \$40,000 a year, and she told me this story a few years ago. She was asked to lead a weekly Bible study for a month for the parents of the school. Now while these schools certainly have generous scholarship aid, the majority of their students come from families with power, money, and prestige. She chose chapters 5-7 of Matthew as her text for the series, the Sermon the Mount. The first week she led a discussion of this text, the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the merciful. The hour went by like it normally does in a Bible Study with parents engaging and reflecting on struggling with the meaning and practicality of this text just like you and I would.

The next week she went and the parents in the room were abuzz.

“Did you hear what happened?”

No, she said.

“A new family to the school, a family from another country with little familiarity with Christianity, was here last week and heard your teaching on the Beatitudes and they went to the head of school.”

“Why?”

“To make sure this isn’t what their kids would be taught here. They didn’t bring their kids to America and enroll them in one of the best schools in the city so that they would learn to live like that.”

Poor in spirit, mourning, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These are not adjectives of successful people in America - so who could blame someone new to this country shocked that these are the values a successful school praises. Even the things that sound nice – merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers – are really difficult to cultivate in the face of the struggles of life, and they certainly aren't precursors to typical measures of success.

To the credit of those parents from the school who came week after week to that study, they knew the tension of the qualities connected to success and the qualities valued in the kingdom of God and they are trying to figure out how to live it. To carry the reality of struggle and the reality of blessing together in a way that helps them live into the kingdom of God. Regardless of how we choose to live, our lives will have suffering and struggle and our lives will have blessing. **Because of how we choose to live**, the struggle will help us live more deeply into the blessing.

Peterson's interpretation of the Beatitudes names how this can happen. When there is less of you, less to hold close, less to distract you, you can hold more tightly to God whose presence is the ultimate source of fulfillment. When you see your inside world more clearly, and trying times will invite you to do that but not make you, when you see your inside world more clearly, you will see God more clearly in the outside world, because you will see everything more clearly.

There is a lot more within the Beatitudes – each one is distinct and could warrant a sermon in itself exploring its depth. What they all have in common though is that they turn us in humility to God. We don't find union with God through great achievements or being the best, but by cultivating an interior that relies on God for the blessings of this life.

In Copenhagen there is an unusual statue of Christ that has a bit of a legend around it. The church officials had commissioned a great statue of the resurrected Christ that we are used to seeing. Arms outstretched, Christ triumphant staring off into the distance. However, after the bronze had been cast something happened. It could have been a sudden temperature change or simply poor casting, but the head of Christ was bent forward. When the church officials saw it, they were aghast. But they had paid a lot for this item, so they were inspired to a lot of prayer on what to do. They decided to keep it. They had realized that, because his head was bent forward, one had to be on their knees to look in the face of Christ. In times of blessing or struggle, the Beatitudes put us on our knees to look in the face of Christ.