

There is a trap hidden in the Beatitudes that I know I have fallen into countless times, and perhaps you have, too. The trap is as simple as it is subtle:

believing that Jesus is setting up the conditions of blessing,  
rather than actually blessing his hearers. Believing that Jesus is saying  
when this happens, then you will be blessed,  
rather than saying, you who are living imperfect lives, I bless you.

To put a clearer light on it, to those whom the elite Roman society has judged unsuccessful, or has used for bettering their own status,

to those from whom Rome has taken away human dignity, Jesus gives it back. For the word used in English, blessed, is loaded with meaning in the Greek—to bless is to give honor, admiration, respect, affection.

That's what Jesus gives to the broken of the world. Honor. Dignity.

In a time and place where honor is given to Roman rulers, cultural elites, Jewish religious authorities. In a culture where success is a sure sign of not only effort, but the smile of the gods, Jesus begins his teaching with this good news:

that God sees something precious in the world  
that Caesar will never be able to see.,  
never be able to acknowledge as good and admirable,  
never, ever honor or bless.

So Jesus begins his very first teaching about the kingdom by reminding his audience that how the world of Caesar,

the world of power and worldly success sees things  
is not how God sees things. In God's kingdom, ordinary peasants, like them,  
fishermen with callouses on their hands, farmers whose land has been  
snatched by the unscrupulous, widows left both sad and vulnerable—  
all those unlikely basket of unlikely's,  
in God's kingdom, they are the ones who hold the place of honor.

Rome doesn't do that. In Rome, the only way to get honor is to be famously successful. To be among the elite and the powerful.

In God's kingdom, honor is a given.

In the sermon on the mount, which begins with the beatitudes,

Jesus begins his whole teaching ministry with this reminder to the people:  
you are beloved of God,

in God's eyes, you already have honor and dignity.  
are already worthy of respect, admiration, affection.  
Jesus is calling them, and calling us,  
into a new understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

That place isn't the Roman Empire, with its agenda of submission and abuse;  
this place is called God's kingdom, and it has a different agenda.

We, the ones who have little status, or power, compared to the elites,  
we have it in us to give honor to others.

We do have power, after all. WE have the power to do justice and love mercy  
and walk humbly with God. God honors that in us too.

In the beatitudes, Jesus is saying aloud, teaching for the first time,  
the nature of an alternative to the corrupted power of Rome, or in our day,  
of Washington and Wall Street. It is called the kingdom of God.

It is the plane of reality where we do have honor, and it is the plane of  
reality where we have to power to honor others  
in a way that Rome or Washington or Wall Street never will.

So early on in Matthew, right after he has roamed the countryside healing and  
casting out demons, after he has called Andrew and Peter, James and John,  
Jesus sits down and begins teaches that the kingdom of God  
is built on our ability to treat each other as beloved, honored children of God.

After calling his disciples and grabbing the attention of the crowds  
the very first thing Jesus tells the would be citizens of God's kingdom  
is that they are loved, and that they are to love each other.

What does God require of kingdom citizens?

Well, nothing less than to live justly, to love mercy and to walk in life  
seeking not greatness or fame, but the companionship of God.

Like I said, it isn't what Rome taught or American culture teaches. In fact, this  
way of living, it can sometimes get you in trouble with Rome. Look at Jesus.

Look at the cross. Foolishness to the world.

The source of life to the Christian.

If we didn't already suspect it, this past fall's election revealed a gaping wound in our democracy.

Some don't trust Wall Street, others don't trust Washington.

Many don't trust either. Hate speech is tolerated and simple politeness and civility is smeared with the term 'political correctness.'

City folk look down on country folk, and rural folk speak with disgust of inner city lives. Red states and blue states, rich and poor, black and white, those who see threat in global warming and those who fear never having meaningful work again.

Like some flesh eating bacteria from a si-fi movie,  
our differences are eating a hole our democracy.

So, in our time and place, in our country that feels so divided,  
in our culture that is wrapped up in pointing fingers and blame,  
what would it mean if we Christians decided to honor those whom God honors?

What if we, those of us here in this parish,  
made an intentional decision to foster relationships of respect, trust, and honor,  
not by ignoring our differences, but by talking about them? What if we  
made an intentional decision to start right here, in our own parish,  
to honor each other by listening to each other?

Are we willing to hear of the fears and sorrows, the hopes and aspirations  
of those who voted differently in last fall's election?

Are we willing to honor the people who hold them?

What would happen if we decided to stop playing all of our culture's games of  
status, power, privilege and division?

What would it cost us if we lived more deeply into justice, and mercy, and  
humility, practicing those virtues first with each other? Is using this place, and our  
life together, as a place to learn the godly practice of honoring each other,  
something we can do together to honor God?

If you are someone who places great trust in Trump to fix what ails us,  
are you willing to hear the fears of those who don't?

If you are someone who dislikes Trump, can you let go of your anger and fear,

in order to hear the longings of those who have placed their hopes in his presidency?

Could this place, this parish community

become a place of healing for our democracy, as we learn to honor the lives and realities of others? Are we willing to become an outpost of God's kingdom?

Is that something you'd like to be a part of?

Let me know if you are. There are things we can do to become more intentional about healing our cultural divisions. I mean that—let me know if you want to do that here at Advent.

It is, and always has been, the way of the world to honor status, wealth and privilege. And it is the way of evil, the nature of evil to use status, privilege and worldly honor to foster hatred, suspicion and division.

In his teachings about the Kingdom, and in his teaching of kingdom ways, Jesus begins to weave us back into a community of honor called the kingdom of heaven. We are invited by Jesus to learn to live justly, love mercy and walk humbly before God, for the sake of the world. An antidote for a broken and divided world.

This is the very first thing that Jesus teaches the disciples as he gathers them around to deliver the sermon on the mount, the very first message that goes out to the curious crowds who follow behind:

You blessed to be honored by God.

And he says, I want to teach you how to honor others.