

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew, composer of this morning’s Gospel, was nothing if not a good Jew. In fact, much of the passion with which he writes is directed at his fellow Jews, who he deeply believes have gotten off track, lost their way and have forgotten much of what they know of God and God’s ways.

So it is that Matthew begins his story of Jesus with words and symbols that invoke powerful images in the minds and hearts of his fellow Jews.

In doing so, Matthew ties Jesus in with the greats of Jewish history: Moses who also experienced divine intervention of the watery sort, both as a little baby in a basket floating in the Nile River, and as a man, parting the Red Sea for his people to escape enslavement of the Pharaoh. Jesus is also like King David, a royal; even as an infant worthy of the honor of other royalty. And, as if that weren’t enough, Jesus’ cousin, the prophet John, hints that Jesus himself might be a prophet, and a mighty one at that---surely an illusion to the mighty prophet Elijah.

By the time we get to the fifth chapter of Matthew, Jewish followers of Jesus would be in a fever pitch--here was the one who was going to kick out the Romans and free them from oppression. Here is the one who will end their humiliation and restore them, finally, to the grandeur of King David’s reign. Finally, the messiah has come to set them free.

And then Jesus opens his mouth, and everything changes. Blessed are the---the who?

So here, right out of the gate, the very first teaching Jesus speaks in Matthew and it is a whammy of a first holy paradox-- the first of many to be spoken by Jesus:

Blessed are the...says our Lord: if you are looking for greatness in a human being, if you are looking for dignity, look no farther than your own soul he says.

It is to the internal state of affairs that Jesus addresses his remarks.

The other day our Wednesday morning Bible study group was grappling with this very odd teaching of Jesus: blessed are the..... Really? Blessed? How so. As we were talking, I remembered a line from a poem that I knew decades ago.

“The deeper that sorrow carves into your being the more joy you can contain. Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?”

In a way, we are blessed if, in grappling with the sorrows of life, our hearts are enlarged. Because an enlarged heart comes to know joy in new ways, deeper ways. Ways that sustain the soul through other sorrows, ways that lead to that wonderful desire of Jesus, that we know peace that passes all understanding.

I think if we take any one of these beatitudes, and hear them afresh, we will understand that Jesus was not promising rewards in heaven, but inviting us into a holy life where we will sometimes taste heaven here on earth. The beatitudes are not platitudes, but an invitation to transformation. And if the Christian life is about anything, it is about our transformation, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into the likeness of Christ.

And that's where Matthew starts the story of Jesus: by this man who would be the king of our hearts, inviting us into a transformation-- to humans who carry the spark of God's love within them and who are fueled by that spark to live lives that reflect God's deep love.

With the Roman's intent upon beating the Jew's into submission, Jesus teaches them that their salvation will not be found in overthrowing the Romans, but in claiming their dignity, their goodness, their joy in life, even in the midst of such terrible circumstances.

Today we celebrate the saints of the Church--luminaries like St. Matthew or St. Paul, who lived out of such conviction of God's ways as shown in the life of Jesus that they could preach the Gospel not only with their lips, but with their lives, for that is what Saints do best: preach the Gospel not only with their lips but with their lives. Included is St. Francis who said: "always preach the Gospel, if necessary, use words."

Today we celebrate that we are invited into that great companionship, that we too can learn to preach the Gospel with our lives. That we, too, are invited to be transformed by our relationship with Jesus into people who are deeper of heart, sturdier of soul, more faithful witnesses to God's love of all creatures. Blessed people, able to endure, well, hopefully not Roman occupation, but certainly all the challenges of modern life that can be soul deadening, and life diminishing.

You will hear me say it frequently from this pulpit: the goal of the Christian life is to be transformed, by the help and power of the Holy Spirit, into the likeness of Christ. But what, exactly does that mean? Well, maybe for one thing, it means this:

That when we are poor in spirit, or humble, as the Hebrew scripture would translate, then we are open to God

That when we let ourselves name and mourn our losses, God can transform them, redeem them.

That when we don't take advantage of our power, we will be the proud owners of everything good on earth that can't be bought.

That when we thirst for God, when our soul hungers to know and live in holy ways, God finds us and teaches us.

That when we practice mercy, and are imitating God's mercy--then we will better know God's love of us.

That when our hearts center on God, we will learn God.

That when we walk Jesus' way of peace (no, he didn't come to overthrow the Romans), we are known to be of God.

That when, just maybe, the world is threatened by all of the above, when the world reacts with scorn to our desire to live with dignity and justice and peace, when it is tough to do all of the above, remember, Jesus knows all that and is blessing you on your way. And in the end, you will know it was worth it.

As Christians, a perennial theme is that we are called to a way of being in the world that is radically different from what the powers and principalities of the world teaches and values.

Sometimes it is maintaining human dignity even in the midst Roman occupation. Sometimes it is intentionally living a lifestyle that is less than what a consumer culture invites.

Being a Christian is basically swimming upstream against the current of popular culture. Being blessed is being strengthened by the struggle so that we can keep swimming--and remembering that it is to the God who made and loves us, that we are swimming.

As we gather this morning at the table, we remember the saints who have gone before us: whether they be the greats, or those known only to us and to God--my Uncle Art, for instance, and we remember that they are at the table with us.

That we are surrounded, in our lives and in our memories, by a great cloud of witnesses and can take courage from their lives as we face challenges in our own lives.

So today we remember the saints of the church and the saints of our lives. Those named and those un-named, who bore witness to the worth of learning to swim upstream, and in doing so, support and encourage us, to this day, to strive to also, in our lives, to keep swimming.

And it is, indeed, a blessed endeavor.