

**IMPORTANT INFORMATION:** The stories, and other elements of this sermon, contain copyrighted materials. We purchase them and have permission to use them in our parish, but not outside of it. Please do not post this sermon, or the stories in it, on any social media site. That would violate our agreement and subject us to a fine

**Pentecost 24 B, All Saints' Nov. 3, 2024**

**"Double Image"**

**Read: Matthew 5:1–12 and/or memorize: Matthew 5: 11 NLT**

**"Do you know why I want to join the church?"** The speaker is a father, in his 30's, holding an infant on his shoulder. He had an L. L. Bean diaper bag slung over his other shoulder. His wife stood next to him, holding the hand of a cranky two-year-old with a runny nose.

The father said, **"We began to worry about raising our children. There are too many opinions about what's right and wrong, too many temptations, too many possible turns. We want our kids to learn some positive values, and the church seems like a place where they can learn them. We want to join the church because the church is one place that teaches good values."**

Things seem to cycle in society. They move back-and-forth between, **"Let the children grow up and learn their own values "** to **"We have to give them a firm foundation and some values. We think the church is the place we can get those values."**

We'd like less ambiguity in our life, a lot more direction, because the choices have become more complex and seem to have more options, so it's hard to sort through them. One frustrated woman said to her support group one day, **"Don't just sit there and accept me – tell me what I need to hear!"** What do we want? And how do we determine what is best? A clear word is needed for confusing times.

I have good news for you. Jesus was a teacher, and had no fear in imparting the values of His Father to any who would listen. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus climbed this mountain, like a new Moses, and taught with authority, unlike many others in His time. In this first Gospel in the New Testament, there are five large collections of teaching, some likening them to the first five books of the Jewish Law.

If Jesus' teachings are at the core of Matthew's Gospel, certainly, the most well-known and important collection of His teachings is the Sermon on the Mount. It is Jesus' longest section of teaching in the whole Bible. If you see the Sermon on the Mount as the central collection of Jesus' teachings, then the Beatitudes are the heart of that sermon.

The blessings Jesus offers are glimpses of the Kingdom He proclaims, for they point to the values which are honored within the dominion of God. Whom does God bless? The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, those hungry and thirsty for righteousness, and those persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Needless to say, pronouncement of blessings on such people is an act that most of us don't completely understand. Jesus lists a variety of characteristics that sketch the Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. Precisely here, we expect His teachings to be the clearest, yet the full meaning of what He says, lies outside our reach, as He offers a glimpse of the Kingdom and its fundamental values. We stumble down the mountain, dizzy and gasping for breath. We are not sure how to understand the Beatitudes.

Scholars don't let us down when it comes to opinions. They have lots of them. Some say that Matthew gives us a glimpse of the future, a peek at the day when every tear shall be dried and suffering shall be no more. Regardless of whatever distress we experience today, the Beatitudes announce that someday God will set things right and that gives us great joy.

After all, Jesus doesn't leave us hanging until the closing moments of the show. Jesus says those who mourn will be comforted. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied. The Beatitudes give us hope for the future. The Beatitudes guide us in the present by pointing to what lies ahead, with the assurance that God will make it happen that way.

Other scholars claim we should interpret the Beatitudes in terms of their promised final reward. "If you are mourning now, someday you will be comforted. If you are hungry for justice today, in the future, you will be satisfied." There is a problem with this interpretation. Jesus doesn't keep His tenses straight.

He mixes present with the future tense. We see it in words like "Blessed are the meek," He says in the present tense, "for they shall inherit the earth," in the future tense. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven," here and now and in the present. So, is He speaking of now or then? Is He speaking of the future or is He saying it's going to happen right now?

Other interpreters say that this mixture, of present and future, indicate the purpose behind these teachings. The Beatitudes point us to God's future, to be certain and sure, but this future is mixed like leaven in the dough of the present life. That is, the Beatitudes offer not merely a glimpse of the future, but a vision of how we can live them now. I could go on, but I'd kind of feel like the rabbis in Jesus' time, arguing with each other about things we cannot really answer or explain.

**There is no simple assurance that living the Beatitudes will make somebody's life a blessed bed of roses. We can claim them as our values to teach our children to pursue in daily life, but they are not stepping stones to success, at least not in this age.**

**You might notice, that saying, "Blessed are the meek," does not get much traction in our society. Weakness is fine for the church some say, but not in the real world, where the meek get to go home early with a pink slip and a pat on the back, as they're shoved out the door.**

**What we can confess, rather rapidly, is it's hard to understand the Beatitudes. Perhaps these wild, untamed qualities are the very source of their power. Anybody who learned these words from the Gospel of Matthew may not understand them right away.**

**Whoever takes these teachings seriously wonders how Jesus can actually say them in such a rough and aggressive world. They don't give the comfort that those anxious parents wanted. They don't give quick assurances to a promised relief for those in need of it. We just cannot be sure.**

**What kind of life does God value? We cannot really know until we follow Jesus to the point that it makes a difference in how we live. Isn't that, after all, exactly what the Saints revealed to us. God's blessing comes not to those who pursue weakness, but to those who pursue Jesus and welcome God's earth as a holy inheritance. Satisfaction comes not to those who work to make themselves righteous, but to those hungry for God's righteousness, as revealed in the cross of Jesus.**

**The Beatitudes of Jesus announce a realm of values that press us to ask where we belong. Do we belong to the world of persecution, war-making, and death? Or do we really belong to the realm of mercy and comfort, purity and righteousness? It can be pretty confusing in daily life.**

**Christian author, Frederick Buechner, tells about watching a scene in the Ken Burns series on the Civil War. It was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, and veterans from the North and South gathered at the battleground to reminisce.**

**At one point, the veterans decided to reenact Pickett's Charge. All the participants took their positions, and then one side began to charge the other. Instead of swords and rifles, this time, the vets carried canes and crutches. As they converged, the old men did not fight one another. Instead, they embraced and began to weep.**

**Buechner muses, "If only those doddering old veterans had seen in 1863 what they now saw so clearly now, 50 years later." Then he said, "Half a century later they saw the great battle**

had been a great madness. The men who were advancing towards them across the field of Gettysburg were not an enemy. They were human beings like themselves, with the same dreams, needs, hopes, the same wives and children, waiting for them to come home . . . What I saw was that we were all of us, created not to do battle with each other, but to love each other. It was not just a truth they saw. For a few minutes, it was the truth they lived. It was a truth they became.”

Perhaps, this is when we need to turn to God's Word to understand something very important. Isaiah 41:10 from the New International Version reminds us, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will hold you with my righteous hand." Reminding us that we're not in this on our own. No, not only are we not alone, but God makes us a promise.

We hear that promise in Psalm 37:5 from the English Standard Version, "Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act." He's not a God who stands on the side. He is the God who acts because He is the God of love.

Because of His action, we can begin to deal with our situation. Where do we belong? When we look out the window of our lives, we see a world of division and war. There are debts to pay and dangers that scare us to death. It looks like our children are at risk and the future seems tenuous. Now and then, as we follow Jesus, this weary, old world is unmasked as an illusion, and we see beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

Count me in: How will following Jesus help you to pursue the life God is calling you to?