

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." – Matthew 5:6*

Today in our Gospel reading we come to one of the most beloved and well-known passages of Scripture: The Beatitudes. Over the next 4 weeks we will hear Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – of which the Beatitudes are the beginning – and it represents the first truly public act of Jesus' ministry, in the Gospel of Matthew. During the season of Epiphany – the time between the end of the Christmas Season and the beginning of Lent – we have been exploring what it means to be a disciple of Jesus: discipleship as hanging onto Jesus' words and actions, being with Jesus; discipleship as being with the people that Jesus was with, the poor, the marginalized, the sick, the sinners, the lonely; discipleship as requiring repentance and being ready for our lives to be thrown upside down. And today we learn a little more about what it means to be a disciples of Jesus.

Before even getting to the content of our Gospel reading today it is important to begin with the fact that Jesus' first public act with his disciples that the Gospel of Matthew highlights, is a sermon (and a pretty long one at that!). Not an exorcism as in the Gospel of Mark, not the Wedding of Cana as in the Gospel of John, not Jesus speaking of liberation for the poor and the oppressed as in the Gospel of Luke, but a sermon. On a very surface level this tells us that discipleship, that following Jesus will be about learning; that we as disciples will learn from Jesus. Learn about God, learn about Jesus, learn about the Kingdom, learn about the world – you name it, as disciples we must be ready and willing to learn from Jesus. Learning as followers of Jesus comes in many forms: we learn as we worship together, we learn as we read and hear scripture, we learn as we pray together and alone, we learn as we build relationships with our community, we learn as we share the good news of God with the world.

We must be careful not to exclusively think of Jesus as a great moral teacher, and we mustn't think of discipleship as merely learning about being a good person: Jesus is not primarily concerned with teaching us to be better people: in being nicer, kinder, more generous etc. His primary concern is declaring the kingdom of God, teaching us about God and enabling us through his grace to live lives now experiencing the fruit of his Kingdom, here on earth. His primary goal in teaching us is to teach us who God is, and show us how to be in relationship with God. We learn because we are with Jesus, because we witness the very life of God, because Jesus shares the life of God with us.

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For those of you that followed the Inauguration of now President Trump, you might have been surprised to hear the Beatitudes read as part of the traditional prayers of Invocation, by the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez. For those of us looking on it doesn't really appear that Trump personifies in any way the people that Jesus described as blessed in our Gospel reading today. Blessed are the poor in Spirit? I doubt Trump would ever agree to that, he's rich in all things after all! Blessed are the meek? One could never accuse Trump of being meek! Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness? Next. Blessed are the merciful? Not after the last week of Executive orders. Blessed are the pure in heart? Pass. Blessed are the peacemakers? You can probably see where I'm going here – there doesn't seem to be a lot in common with Jesus' words in the Beatitudes and the public life and persona of Donald Trump. And yet I think it was vitally important that those words were read, it is important because at the celebration of the inauguration of the President of the United States of America, one of the most important and influential positions in worldwide politics, God's vision of the kingdom, God's plan for the life of disciples, for the life of those who follow Jesus was prayed and read out. God's vision for what it means to be a disciple was broadcast for millions to hear, in stark contrast to the politics and persona of wealth, hatred, authority etc.

Because that is what the Beatitudes are about. They are a glimpse of what it is like to be a disciple of Jesus, they are a glimpse of what it is like to experience the Kingdom of God here and now. They are not, moral guidelines or promises of blessings and rewards if you pattern your life after them. They are not a set of instructions on how to live a good life and earn the blessing of God. They are not merely rules to follow so that you can be the best person or best disciple you can be – rather they are windows into the kingdom of God, they are promises of a life that is transformed by Jesus, they are a foretaste of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The Beatitudes are sign posts

that point us towards the very heart of God, they allow us to witness and better understand the very character and life of God – the life that he intends for all those who have received his Son and believed in him.

Let us hear the Beatitudes again: Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in Spirit, blessed are the peacemakers and blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. This is what discipleship is. These are not qualities that the world celebrates. The life of discipleship that Jesus paints is not a glorious picture, happy picture; it is not full laughs, it isn't an easy life. You see the life of a disciple "will be busy and restless and maybe even a nettlesome one not because he or she is trying to get to heaven but because folks like this have seen the kingdom in Jesus and they're not going to settle for less ever again." (*Scott Hoezee*)

Our lives take the shape of the Beatitudes, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, because we have encountered Jesus and are transformed by him – the life that Jesus outlines is not requirement before you commit to following him, but rather a product of our encounter with him, a product of our lives being transformed by the one who calls us to follow him. The life of a disciple is an almost paradoxical mix of living here in this world and living in the Kingdom of God which is at hand. Disciples have one foot in the world and one foot in the Kingdom of heaven which is breaking through. We as the church, as disciples of Christ cannot merely be focused on blessing which extends beyond this world, for the thrust of Jesus' words is on both the here and now and in the time to come. This is clear from Jesus' words: after all the meek will inherit the earth, not heaven. And so as disciples of Jesus we live in an uneasy and uncomfortable tension between living in the world and living in the Kingdom. Disciples of Jesus are different than their worldly counterparts because they have encountered the life of God in Jesus and are being transformed, but they are also called into the world to serve, to 'do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God' as the prophet Micah declared.

And so as disciples of Jesus, as we spend time with Jesus and the people that he spent time with – the lost, the broken, the sick, the outcasts, the lonely – our lives will begin to take on the shape of the Beatitudes. We will be poor in spirit, not thinking of ourselves as great and worthy of praise, because we know as the Apostle Paul that "the one who boasts, boasts in the Lord." We will mourn the injustices and unrighteousness in the world, and know that our comfort is in the presence of our Lord. We will be meek, not seeking to oppress and leverage power and influence but rather seek to understand and be with our fellow human beings. We will hunger and thirst for righteousness, challenging the systems of this world that spread hatred, oppression and prejudice – beginning with ourselves putting away the hatred, and prejudice in our own hearts – welcoming people who are different than us, who make us uncomfortable. We will be merciful, forgiving those who injure us, seeking reconciliation with those who anger us – beginning with the hurts and pains in the midst of our community. We will be pure of heart, seeking to ensure that everything we do as a community of disciples is done for God's Kingdom, that everything we do as Christians is rooted in the values and teaching of God, that we learn at the feet of Jesus. We will be peacemakers, seeking to resolve our differences and disagreements peaceably, rooting out evil and violence in our own hearts.

As our lives are more and more oriented to Jesus, they will reflect the values that are at the heart of God's life and then the last two beatitudes will become truer of our lives. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake; blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on account of Jesus. We do not choose to follow Jesus because it promises a good life, we do not respond to Jesus' call because God promises to make things easier, we do not follow Jesus in our spare time or just on a Sunday morning it encompasses our whole life – in fact the life of a disciples run counter to the life the world expects and so disciples run into opposition. The life of discipleship runs counter to the greed, the selfishness, the hatred, the prejudice that is exemplified, personified, and intensified in the administration of President Trump and the reactionary voices that exist even in our country and across the globe.

Let us hunger and thirst for righteousness, let us look at Jesus, spend time with him and with his people, and our lives will be transformed; transformed by the very life of God so that we can't help but be restless for the sake of justice and righteousness. That is true blessing. May we know that blessing today and forevermore. Let us pray.