

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

In our appointed Epistle reading today, St. John reminds us that:

...we are God's children *now*; what we *will be* has not yet been revealed.<sup>1</sup>

(1 John 3:2)

According to St. John, right now as we sit in this assembly, we are told that we are God's children...what we will be is unknown to us. What will we be?

As a child I was fascinated with this type of question. My first-grade teacher used to call me a "pokey-puppy" because I never got my work done on time...I've improved since then, but not much. I rarely went out for recess because I had to stay in the class and get my work done. According to the comments on my report card my problem was, I marched to the beat of a different drum and or I was a "dreamer." I used to stare out the window and dream about what I would become, and I guess according to some of my teachers I suppose they imagined that I would amount to very little. I guess in some ways, according to them I may have...but nonetheless I sure did enjoy just staring out the window and imagining all the things I used to imagine...things like, what will I become. To this day I find myself falling into old habits, as I watch my grandson and imagine what he will become. Sadly, my dreams are darkened when I imagine what he will have to face in his lifetime, as he goes about making his way through life. But I know he will be blessed just as I was blessed in my out-of-step daydreaming...just as we all are blessed in our various human conditions. This is what Jesus is reminding us of nine times in his Sermon on the Mount that is before us today.

There are probably a good number of us that when we listen to the Sermon on the Mount or consider this sermon from Jesus, somewhere in our thoughts about of this sermon we position ourselves by imagining where we fit in...am I poor in spirit, am I meek enough, have been wronged and mistreated, am I persecuted, well then, we imagine...I am blessed. Given its All Saints' Sunday we are reminded that we all have mourned the loss of a loved one or someone dear to us...so we breath a sigh of relief because we fit into what we imagine is the paradigm that Jesus is framing us in...so we assume because of *this*, I am blessed!

Sadly, this is how we take this sermon and when we do, I think we miss the point; rather, we get in the way of what Jesus is teaching in this sermon. Today Jesus is preaching about our human condition and not one thing in particular. And because we are ashamed of our human condition we seek to fit in somewhere, somehow. But Jesus is not asking where we fit in, he is telling us within these Beatitudes that God is not ashamed of our human condition, our human lowliness. And in that condition, God is right here with us in the middle of it and because of His presence in Jesus Christ, we are blessed<sup>2</sup>...we are all blessed as we are.

But our positioning in the Beatitudes, and our view of them as a formula for "happy" living may not be our entire fault. This may be the result or the persuasion of bad theology and poor scriptural translations. The "Good News Bible" or "Good Humor" Bible as I call it, says that

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<sup>1</sup> Italicizations are my emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> *The collected sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Douglas W. Stott, et al., ed. Isabel Best. Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 2012. This is not a direct quote but uses the intention and some similar words from Bonhoeffer's sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent December 3, 1933 entitled "My Spirit Rejoices" Page 117.

this “Good News Bible” is “Today’s English Version” of Holy Scripture. In the translation of today’s English within this Bible Jesus goes up a *hill* and says:

Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor...

Happy are those who mourn...

Happy are those who are humble...

And so on.

This “Bible” says that it is “Today’s English translation” but what it means is that it is translated for or according to, today’s sensitivities, and what I mean by that is that it centered on us and our sensitivities rather than God. And this is where they fail in the translation and lose historical and theological connections that are deeply intentional and even defining for the writers of these Gospels. Once again, the “Good News Bible” begins this morning Gospel lesson this way:

<sup>5:1</sup> Jesus saw the crowds and went up a hill, where he sat down. His disciples gathered around him, <sup>2</sup> and he began to teach them:

While it may seem insignificant, “hill” verses “mountain,” the use of “hill” plays down the majestic intent. Matthew in the Greek text doesn’t use “hill” it is translated as mountain or mount throughout the Gospel. Matthew is intentionally using a term for mountain because mountains were sacred sites and the homes of the gods.

From the Book of Exodus, we know that the Torah is revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Just as Moses received God’s Commandments on Sinai, Jesus reveals God’s will to the disciples in the Gospel lesson and to us on and from a mountain and NOT a hill.<sup>3</sup> A mountain is much more lofty and much more majestic than a hill, and this is intentional.

When we assume the language or a certain word does not sound as hip enough...or when we just don’t like a certain word because it offends us, we insert our feelings and ourselves by saying I like this translation better. In this there is no consideration of the context that the word is being used in. And this is what really troubles me when the editors of the “Good Humor Bible” translate the Greek word, *μακάριος* as “happy.” *μακάριος* translates, blessed, fortunate, or yes happy but “happy” is not used at all in any scholarly translations. When translating a certain term one must see how the author uses the term in the entire body of work, in this case, how is *μακάριος* used throughout the Gospel of Matthew. The authors of Matthew use this term 10 times while the entire Bible uses the term 48 times and never once is it translated as happy. When looking then at the Greek term for “happy” or rejoice at it is mostly translated, the term is used 24 times throughout the entire Bible and only 4 times in the New Testament and it is never used in the Gospels. This would mean then that translating *μακάριος* as “happy” is not appropriate because it is an inaccurate translation.

When looking at the bigger picture of what is taking place as a result of what Jesus is teaching in this sermon, “happy” is NOT what God does...God blesses us! And here is my whole intent for bringing this up, by translating this Greek term as “happy” it places the focus of the Beatitudes on me and my subjective human feelings rather than the objective divine action of blessings I receive from God. In the middle of our human condition, our poverty, our grief and sadness, our

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<sup>3</sup> *Sacra Pagina Series, Volume I, The Gospel of Matthew*, Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., editor. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, A Michael Glazier Book, 1991. Chapter 10, The Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, page 78.

hunger and thirst, sits Jesus, elevating us, pulling us up from that human condition...reminding us all, NOT by patronizing us by telling us to be “happy,” rather Jesus sits in the midst of our human condition and tells us that we are blessed by God despite our human condition.

Today, right now we suffer in our various conditions of poverty...right now as we mourn the loss of these very saints lifted up today...right now as we sit in our infirmities of various sorts, and as we hunger and thirst for God’s righteousness Jesus Christ is present in the proclamation of the Good News and in this Holy Meal telling us all that we are healed in the blessed promise of the paradise that is to come.

Unfortunately, no matter what is pointed out, we will continue to react to this Sermon on the Mount by attempting to position ourselves in it. However, the Beatitudes are not practical advice for successful living. They are a prophetic declaration, a visionary’s pronouncement made on the conviction and belief in the coming-and-already present Kingdom of God. The notion of the coming-and-already present Kingdom of God is also revealed when Jesus says to the thief next to him on the cross,

‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’ (Luke 23:43)

The Beatitudes are an objective reality or an unbiased reality that is the result of the divine action by God and not about our subjective feelings about it, or our particular positioning in it, and or our idiosyncratic function because of it. In other words, we don’t earn our blessing by where we position ourselves...God gives it because of who we are as a child of His. Nonetheless, there will be those who continue to position themselves in this Sermon on the Mount but the context of this Sermon on the Mount would tell us this not the intent of what Jesus is teaching us. Just before Jesus goes up the mountain to preach to the crowds we hear this:

<sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. <sup>24</sup> So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. <sup>25</sup> And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. (Matthew 4:23-25)

Today, Jesus teaches us within these Beatitudes that our human condition is healed in the many and various blessings from God! These Beatitudes point out the same human condition as those who are in need of healing...who gathered around Jesus just before he went up the mountain. The Beatitudes assure us that, no matter what...God is in the midst of us...healing us by blessing us. No matter how tragic, how beat down our faith becomes, how much injustice surrounds us and how feeble our attempts are to make it right in the world, ultimately God blesses us because we cannot “achieve” our righteousness...ultimately it is given and ordained by God’s blessings and not acquired or achieved through my good feelings. Blessed are we...no matter how bad it gets.

We can take comfort and we can rejoice because God blesses us and remains with us in our very human condition. Bonhoeffer said, “Can we do anything, amid whatever is happening, other

than stop and listen, to tremble and reach out to (God)?”<sup>4</sup> ...and as we reach out in our human condition to God, He blesses us. We are not made happy in our broken and sinful condition, who can honestly say that?! But we are blessed by God in that condition...blessed because we recognize our human condition and our need for God’s grace. In our human condition we reach out for God... and God says to us, take and eat...this is my body take and drink...this is my blood given for you. Blessed are we, for given for us is the kingdom of heaven.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*

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<sup>4</sup> *The collected sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Douglas W. Stott, et al., ed. Isabel Best. Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 2012. This is a closing line from Bonhoeffer’s sermon for the First Sunday in Advent December 3, 1933 entitled “Come, O Rescuer.” Page 114.