

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

Within our Gospel today we have the very familiar opening words from the Sermon on the Mount. We know these words as the Beatitudes...titled from the Latin word *beatus* which means "blessed." And for the remainder of the Epiphanytide in this lectionary year A, our appointed Gospel lesson will contain excerpts from this Sermon on the Mount.

Within this sermon Jesus Christ is using words to communicate the blessed grace that is far greater than any human form of communication can even describe or contain. But the power of this may be somewhat lost due to our familiarity and the way in which we have tailored these words to fit ourselves and our lifestyles. Because of our familiarity, I would like to encourage us to listen to the words of the next few Gospel lessons in the following weeks with fresh ears and understandings, try to hear something new instead of what we already claim to know about these very familiar words.

At the same time be mindful of how different translations of scripture can be very misleading, especially in the case of this Sermon on the Mount when they substitute the word "blessed" with "happy." We are not made happy in our broken and sinful condition, who can honestly say that?! Do we really find happiness in the brokenness of spirit, in the brokenness of sorrow, and in the brokenness of poverty? But we are blessed by God in our human condition...blessed because we recognize our human condition and our need for God's grace...and in this condition God says to us ALL, Blessed are you...the only role we play in this blessedness is that we receive it, we do not earn it by maneuvering ourselves or manipulating our situation to get it, God gives it through the life and death of His only Son, Jesus Christ.

I used to serve a parishioner who, during Bible studies, would boldly proclaim that the Bible was his instructional manual for *his* life. And I would say that this is a very noble and righteous guide to follow. He would then share with me what he believed to be a very clever common and popular acronym for B.I.B.L.E. as his Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. This acronym has been used as a teaching tool to encourage reading scripture and to highlight the Bible as a guide for living a faithful life. Once again, very noble to aspire to live such a life. However, as I said and as I have experienced, the instructions that most aspire to follow are merely tailored to one's own liking and one's own personal interpretation. I think what happens in this is that our focus is turned inward on ourselves and how well I am doing compared to someone else. The Bible is not necessarily about me, it is about God and how God has acted toward us all and what God has promised to us because we cannot live the life we ought to live.

In this Sermon on the Mount we hear Jesus telling us all about the Beatitudes. Our reaction to the Beatitudes is along the same lines as our thinking of the Bible as an instruction book, we think the Bible and the teachings of Jesus are all about ourselves and what I need to do in order to be blessed. Our response to this sermon becomes, "What should *I* do?" "How should *I* act?" But the sermon that is before us from Jesus is about promise, the promise of the blessing of God. Instead of asking about how "I" must act, perhaps we ought to consider, "What does this sermon promise...period?"

What does this sermon promise, not just *me*, what does this sermon promise the crowds out there, the crowds of the sick, the poor, the mournful, the lost, the disenfranchised, or the downtrodden?¹

When cruelty becomes our policy, some celebrate and some grieve. Sadly, there are no winners when this becomes our reality because divisiveness becomes heightened by our interpretation of our “B.I.B.L.E.”, or our interpretations of our basic instructions before leaving earth. And the Bible becomes tailored to my thinking, my prejudices, leaving grace limited to me and those like me because I have concluded that I have followed correctly, I’m deserving...and I am blessed. Loving our neighbor becomes adapted to, do to your neighbor before they do it to us.

There is an element within this Gospel lesson with the Beatitudes that I believe gets over looked because our attention or our thoughts turn quickly to ourselves, what should I do, how should I act, how can I position myself for a blessing? Where then is the community that *WE* are called into through faith, through Baptism, and most importantly, called and centered in God. The blessings that are before us today should lead to decisions and salvation for all and not just me.

Before Jesus even opens his mouth today in this passage, we hear that Jesus saw the crowds. Now...does anyone ask, who are the people in the crowds or have we overlooked the crowds and jumped to the “Blessed are you” parts because we are too busy worrying about ourselves and our blessing? In our Gospel lesson last week from chapter four of Matthew’s Gospel, we heard about the beginning of the ministry of Jesus and the calling of his first four disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John. We heard that Jesus left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. Jesus was an alien living in these fishing villages that were recognized as Assyrian provinces or Gentile territories before they would become Christian territories.² These outlying territories and people who were devastated by war at the hands of the Assyrians, are people and lands that are in the darkness of devastation, frustration, and loss. This is where Jesus finds his disciples.

But then the following verses are not added to the lectionary readings. The verses that are not included find Jesus ministering to the crowds in these darkened territories. Matthew follows the call of the disciples with this:

²³ 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. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. (Matthew 4:23-25)

Here are the crowds of people that Jesus is encountering and preaching to today in our Gospel lesson. The crowds consist of the diseased, the demoniacs, the epileptics, and the paralytics, the crowds that Jesus is preaching to today are the outcasts of the territories. And the very first thing they...we, hear Jesus say is, “*Blessed are you!*”

¹ Skinner, Matthew L., *Matthew, The Gospel of Promised Blessings*. Nashville: Abington Press, 2024, Chapter One, “Promised Blessings”, page 1. Questions asked in this sermon are taken from DR. Skinner’s writing.

² Van Harn, Roger E., *The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts, The Third Readings: Gospels*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. The commentary based on the appointed Gospel reading for the Third Sunday After the Epiphany, Year A, Matthew 4:12-23, page 23.

Jesus is bringing blessing to the people who are suffering and living circumstances that are anything but blessed. Yes, we hear that the crowds consisted of the diseased, the demoniacs, the epileptics, and the paralytics but we still want to know who are the poor in spirit, who are those who mourn, and who are the meek? And we want to know because we want to know if “I” qualify as one of them? There are people among us who have lost hope, lost dignity, and have lost self-worth. There are people who never find their way amid the loss and emptiness of grief.³ And there is no prosthetic for this type of loss. There are those who get pushed aside, those whose voices are never heard or shouted down by voices that are so self-centered and self-righteous. There are those who have no advocate or those who have no boot straps to pull themselves up with. And yes, there are those who feel so self-righteous because they have lived a white-privileged life without a single road block and accomplished all they wanted and still need to step on others to show they are Christian in order to receive their blessings.

As we attempt to align ourselves to the blessing we hear about today, let’s just take ourselves out of the picture and look at what Jesus is really saying. Jesus is reminding us within these Beatitudes of a God who is not ashamed of our human condition, our human lowliness, or our human brokenness. Jesus is preaching to us all and saying to us all that God goes right into the middle of the crowds, into the middle of our humanness, right in the middle of our brokenness and mends us all with His blessings.⁴ This kingdom of God breaks into our world...our culture that is steeped in self-idolatry, individualism, divisiveness, cruelty, poverty, social oppression, sickness, violence, and death. Unfortunately, in this culture we live in today we use our faith to view ourselves as better than our situation in life and with our so called “Instructional manuals” in hand and our self-informed-opinions we place ourselves in a position with God. The words we then hear are: Blessed are we who are better than all the idolatry, individualism, divisiveness, cruelty, poverty, social oppression, sickness, violence, and death. In this we assume then that God walks as we walk, thinks what we think, believes what we believe, and dislikes and even hates what we hate...and to hell with the others.

Just look at all the folks throughout the centuries who tried to tell us of a more peaceful way, those who strove for a better way of living and encouraged us to live together peacefully in harmony, and to try to love one another...people like: Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, John Kenndey, Bobby Kenndey, Martin Luther King Jr, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, John Lennon, and even Jesus Christ⁵...all murdered because they stood up for justice for all, they stood up for a peaceful way of life...and we saw them as troublemakers, uppity, and rabblers.

Today in this Sermon on the Mount Jesus is telling us that God does not remove us from our elements and arrange matters to suite our opinions, our assumed facts, and our views, God does not follow the path that we lay out before God. God’s path is God’s path according to God and not us.⁶ God can use each of us...just as God can use my words today to strengthen faith, to open hearts and minds to His ways, His path, *BUT* our actions and my words will never set God’s path nor will they make any of us God, God is God the original, the only One and none of us are God.

³ Skinner, Matthew L., *Matthew, The Gospel of Promised Blessings*. Nashville: Abington Press, 2024, Chapter One, “Promised Blessings” in this chapter DR. Skinner explains in more detail his understanding of who each Beatitude can be, on pages 4-5.

⁴ *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” Not a direct quote but an imitation of the sentiment concerning God coming “down” to us in our humanness. Page 117.

⁵ George Carlin’s 2005 HBO special *Life Is Worth Losing*

⁶ *Ibid.* page 117.

Today in this Sermon on the Mount from our Lord Jesus Christ may we hear NOT instructions to find ways to maneuver ourselves in order to find favor with God...may we with fresh ears and an open heart hear of the Good News of God's promise of mercy that comes to us all...as we are...for we too have many diseases of our souls, our brokenness, our sinfulness, and this makes us all one with God through our Lord Jesus Christ who gladly heals us all. May we too gather around him in this Holy Meal...in this time of healing and ask nothing pertaining to this life, but rather simply say, Amen...for the healing we receive from this bread and wine. May our souls then, and our actions magnify the grace of God...may our souls "rejoice and be glad," because we are blessed and we are called to be the living words of faith, we are called to be the Good News, rejoice and be glad because, blessed are we who are called through our faith to keep alive the tradition, rejoice and be glad because we are *ALL* included in the heavenly kingdom of God just as we are and just as they are.

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