

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

January 29, 2023

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At the top of a beautiful, verdant hillside - overlooking the Sea of Galilee - sits the Church of the Beatitudes. The church provides a stunning view of Galilee: you can see for miles. The church is built on the site where tradition holds, Jesus delivered his Sermon on the Mount. And the Beatitudes, today's reading, form the preamble to that sermon.

After the Lord's prayer, the Beatitudes are among the most familiar lines in the Gospels, appearing framed in many homes. For centuries, these lines have spoken to the hearts of millions. Which blessing speaks to you most powerfully today?

"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 the sake of righteousness, 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.

What blessing speaks to you most powerfully today?

The Beatitudes, or blessings, were not uttered as a “to do list”, but more as a series of promises. Promises about who is included the reign of God, the beloved community, that Jesus was

inaugurating in this proclamation. And they were words of comfort to the community to whom Matthew wrote this gospel - a Jewish Christian community increasingly at odds with, and marginalized by, the local authorities. They were a community under persecution.

One can also read this text as a description of the person preaching: Jesus. For he was all these things. He embodied the message he brought. God's beloved Son announcing the promises of God and the birth of a new kind of community.

These are improbable blessings to be sure. Grieving, poverty, persecution - not things the world aspires to. Some hardly seem like blessings at all. But they are striking hallmarks of the alternative community Jesus sought to convene: of those on the margins of power and polite society. A community of the worn and wounded. Above all, a community of the vulnerable, the weak, the imperfect, the broken hearted.

As I've been reflecting on this text, my attention has returned again and again to the line, "Blessed are those that mourn, for they will be comforted." On a personal level, I'm one of the

grieving - especially for my recently-deceased cousin Chet - the closest thing I'll ever have to a brother. I was privileged to be able to accompany him in his few days on earth. Reduced by years of disease, his death, like the last ten years of his life, was hard. And yet in the early hours of the morning, his life ebbing, as I prayed for him, and recalled for him memorable moments of our 70+ years together, there was a certain joy. A sense of rightness - that he was going home - free of the pain and limitation that had plagued him for so long. I was grateful that I was there to accompany him to the gate.

And we at St. John's are a community in grieving too, for those who've passed in recent months and their sorrowing families, as well as for those in our congregation and among our families facing life threatening disease. In our sorrow and loss, Jesus tell us we are blessed. Not because loss is a good thing. It's not. We are blessed because Jesus promises us that in that heartbreak, he is present, right with us. Every step. As Isaiah foretold, Jesus was, and is: "A man of sorrow and acquainted with grief." And we are blessed too that in our sorrow, our hearts

can be softened, becoming more compassionate — more like Jesus — enabling us to be a consoling presence to others.

The mourning Jesus speaks of in his sermon is not simply about our individual experiences of loss and sorrow, as powerful as those are. He's also talking about mourning the failure of the community to live up to God's calling - remember when Jesus weeps for Jerusalem. That calling so powerfully proclaimed in our reading from Micah today, "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God." A harbinger of the Beatitudes.

It's a calling that we so often fall *far* short of realizing. I often think about Jesus weeping over Jerusalem while I watch the evening news, with the almost nightly caveat, "Be aware some of the following images you may find disturbing". And they are right. The brutality of war, the ravages of famine, the latest atrocity - like the horrible beating of Tyree Nichols in Memphis. It's an assault on the heart. And yet, I believe Jesus is right there in the midst of it. Jesus weeps.

Just this past week in Monterey Park, in Half Moon Bay, in Oakland - mass shootings. Horrible events that have become frighteningly routine. Since 2013, California has experienced a mass shooting about every seven to ten days. Forty mass shootings have been recorded in the US so far just in this first month of 2023 – a record. Jesus weeps!

It's for that reason that I wear this orange stole today, as clergy are doing throughout the Diocese this Sunday. It is an emblem of lament for the plague of gun violence in our midst. Later in our service I'll invite you to join me in a prayer for the victims and their families. In addition, in your bulletin at the Bishop's request you'll find an opportunity to go beyond "thoughts and prayers" to action with your elected representatives. This a heartbreaking issue, complicated, where people of good faith can disagree on how best to address it. What the simple letter articulates is a call, a lament, a demand for action.

Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted. In our personal sorrows and in our collective griefs, Jesus promises to be with us. Promises that he is right there in the midst of the worst of it. Our beloved, crucified and risen Lord - present, in his

body broken on this altar; present in that body broken on the pavement; present in that beloved body on the hospital bed. And present too, in our own broken, wounded hearts. Present and comforting, and weeping right along with us.

Thanks be to God.