

Epiphany 4
Year A 2017
Mt 5:1-12

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

We hear in today's gospel
the Sermon on the Mount
also known as the Beatitudes.

This is the longer version of a similar sermon found in Luke's gospel.

For many of us, this is a gospel
that we have heard many times during our lifetime.

I suspect for many of us
we have a vision or a memory
of a framed version,
or a plaque,
or in my family - a needlepoint sampler
of the Beatitudes.

So it's not a surprise
to think that many of us
hear this gospel passage
with an ingrained understanding
or vision of its meaning.

Now, I've heard many sermons
and discourses on this passage
that didn't feel quite true to me so
I spent some period of time
working with this passage.

What immediately captures my attention is:

What are we to make of the fact
that Matthew chooses to record
the Sermon on the Mount
as Jesus' first teachings to the disciples?

We are told that Jesus,
accompanied by Simon Peter, Andrew,
James and John,
has been traversing Galilee
teaching in synagogues,
proclaiming the good news of the kingdom,
and curing every disease and sickness among the people.

Why is it then
that Matthew chose not
to record any of these teachings?

What is it about Jesus' first sermon to the disciples,
and presumably the crowds gathered near enough to hear,
that compelled Matthew to publicize these first teachings?

Perhaps it was important that the newest students of Jesus needed to see the public proclamation of God before they could understand the sermon Jesus was to give on the mountain.

Perhaps it was a belief that the sermon would impart a different understanding of the Incarnate Word of God only after the disciples had been immersed in God's love enacted in their world.

Often times, the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes are held out as the prerequisites for followers of Jesus.

I can imagine that many of us have heard varying versions of the belief that the Beatitudes are a strict moral code with the implied understanding that a failure to live into such a code automatically results in the exclusion of many.

However, it's important for us to know that the Beatitudes are a series of blessings, God's blessings.

Contrary to what many of us believe, or have been told, they were not delivered by Jesus as a set of requirements for the disciples or us.

The Beatitudes are not a list of ethical imperatives but rather are indicative.

They are blessings and promises available to all.

You see, Jesus wasn't asking the disciples
to become poor in spirit,
or meek, or hungry for righteousness' sake.

Instead, these blessings were, and are,
offered to comfort those
who find themselves poor and hungry and persecuted.

You see, for Matthew, history is divided into two stages:
the present era immersed in evil
which God will bring to an end
and the coming Kingdom in which all things
will take place according to God's purposes of love and justice.

To be blessed is not simply to be happy,
the meaning of the Latin root of the word which became Beatitude,
but to know that you are included in the coming Kingdom.

That humanity is an integral part of the Kingdom of God.

As it was for the disciples,
this is hard for us to grasp in a world
in which it seems blessings are only available
to those who are successful
in the acquisition of material goods,
often at the expense of others.

Daily, it seems,
we are reminded that our current societal ethos
supports the reality that being peaceful,
merciful, and humble will get you nowhere
in a society grounded in competition and fueled by fear.

Another difficult piece for many
in understanding the Beatitudes is the language.

As an example, how do we understand the term meek?

A quick scan of a dictionary
provides definitions such as
docile, compliant, overly submissive and spiritless.

I don't know about you,
but I certainly don't hear anything in those definitions
that I want to strive to be.

Meek, as used in this gospel passage,
does not carry any of those definitions,
but instead, means one's understanding
of their place in connection with God;
their status in relation to God.

An understanding of who is God and who is not.

This most certainly does not translate to spiritless or overly submissive.

Two additional and commonly misunderstood terms are righteous and righteousness.

How many of us tend to think of those referred to as righteous as more along the lines of "holier than thou," imperious, or pompous?

Again, this isn't the understanding the disciples would have had at the time they heard Jesus' sermon.

The late Bible scholar Marcus Borg authored a wonderful book titled, *Speaking Christian*, which I would highly recommend to anyone.

In it Borg writes that righteous and righteousness are positive words in the Bible.

Righteous means to do what is right, not to hold oneself out as morally superior but to do what is in line with God's desires.

Borg also shows the correlation between righteousness and justice throughout the Bible stating that justice is often an equally correct translation for righteousness.

For many of us the concept of justice has a negative connotation.

We seem to understand justice more in terms of punishment as in legal justice.

But Borg points out that in scripture, justice is predominantly positive.

A study of scripture shows that God's justice is not exclusive but is distributive.

Only distributive justice can be God's desire - that grace and mercy are offered equally to all.

There are many references throughout scripture to God's desire for justice on a social and political, not just individual, level.

By that, it refers to the way a society is put together, its political and economic structure; its distribution of power and wealth and their effects on society.

Borg states that when the Bible speaks of God's passion for righteousness and justice it refers to the way the world, the social order that humans create, should be.

Throughout time, the world has been shaped by the wealthy and powerful to their benefit.

But this stands in opposition to God's passion for justice, a justice that is distributive – meaning the fair distribution of material necessities in life; the right to safe space, food, clean water, etc.

The availability of the basic necessities
in order that each might have the opportunity
to fully become the being created in the image of God by God.

This understanding of God's passion for distributive justice
is grounded in scripture,
in acknowledgement that God created the world
and it belongs to God.

The world does not belong to humanity to do with as we wish.

I wonder, do we hear and understand
the Beatitudes differently when we say:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *justice*,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for *justice*,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This is the foolishness of which Paul writes to those in Corinth.

The foolishness of the cross,
the foolishness of the church
and the foolishness of righteousness.

Jesus and Paul stand against the Roman Empire
because of its injustice and violence.

The message proclaimed by Jesus and Paul
stood in opposition to the powerful and wealthy.

Likewise, the message of God's Kingdom stands in opposition today's world.

To affirm the right-ness of justice for all is foolishness to the power structures of the world.

But to those of us who stand firmly for God's justice; who find our courage in the knowledge of God's mercy for all; this is the foolishness that centers our belief in doing what is right in the face of all that stands in opposition.

In the words of Karoline Lewis:

The Beatitudes are a call to action for the sake of creating the world God imagines.

And these days, we need this reminder -- when our imagination may be limited.

When our hope for the future might have been dimmed.

When we think what we do and what we say and what we believe does not matter.

Because we know, we know that the opposite is true.

I find the current times to be very troubling
in ways that I have never before experienced.

I hear from many of you the same concern.

So how do we move forward in this time and this place?

For me, I am knitting.

I am knitting things
which I hope will bring some joy and/or comfort
and I am giving them to people I care about.

It's a simple thing, not big items,
not terribly time consuming,
but an act which allows me
to feel as though I've made a positive statement
about what and who I hold dear.

And, I am standing up,
speaking out,
and yes, even marching.

I will be counted in these times.

Because, my friends,
what we **do**
and what we **say**
and what we **believe**
does matter.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice,
and to love kindness,
and walk humbly with your God.