

4 Epiphany A 2023

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

One afternoon long ago,
I was reading a turgid and tiresome article
When I came across a phrase
That over time,
Has changed my life.

“The patient, luminous, and inviting presence
Of a transcendent and mysterious God
Intimately active
In the pain and glory of life.”

It’s the finest description of divine grace that I know of.
Sometimes, when I repeat it or think of it,
I wish I’d said it myself,
Rather than reading it all those years ago
Near the end of that too-long article
On the place of grace
In the work of a modern theologian.

But more often when I consider those words,
I simply give thanks, thanks
That the grace that so often defies description
Would, for a moment,
Allow itself to be captured in a single sentence.
A sentence to me so captivating
That I wrote it down and committed it to memory on the spot.

What is grace?
I’ll say it again.

“The patient, luminous, and inviting presence
Of a transcendent and mysterious God
Intimately active
In the pain and glory of life.”

Come to think of it,
It sounds not only like grace,
But like Jesus himself.

When Jesus went up the mountain and sat down
To teach his friends and followers,
To offer them a new way of being in the world,
A new “best way to live,”
As we say to the children,
He began, not with commandments,
But with blessing.
The Sermon on the Mount
Has been called his inaugural address,
And it begins with blessing,
Blessing that is already and always ours,
No matter what.

What does it mean to live a life of blessing?
What is the life of grace?
Only after Jesus shows his friends
The paradoxical way of grace
Does he offer them startling ways and practices
That show forth that paradox.
Turn the other cheek.
Give away your shirt.
Move mountains.
Ask, and it will be given to you.
Full measure, shaken down, running over.

The beatitudes speak of a life of grace
That we sometimes experience
As inexplicable lightness in the midst of pain,
Hope entering the pit of despair,
As the abiding presence of love,
Against all reason.
A foolishness wiser than wisdom.
A weakness that is stronger than strength.
It makes no sense;
It is beyond our comprehending,
And yet,
From time to time,
We know that it is real.

The beatitudes speak of a life
Lived within the realm of grace
Not only when we can't imagine it is so,
But even when it makes us angry
To be told it is so.

The beatitudes do not always offer comfort.
Sometimes they seem like a fairy tale,
An empty promise.
Those in the depths of mourning may not imagine
That comfort will ever come.
And sometimes it does not.
The meek have so far not inherited the earth.
It does not seem like a blessing to be reviled.
This is the reality of our experience.

The beatitudes, though,
Do not speak of fixing
Or even of the kind of comfort we need and want.
No one knew that better than Jesus.
He lived his teaching to the end,
To the bitter end of a shameful death.
And there were moments
When he wondered if he were blessed,
And yet he became the blessing.

Blessed is the one who despaired,
For he has become the source of hope.

The beatitudes do not promise ease or refreshment
Or solutions.
They promise grace.

The beatitudes speak of a God who is near,
A God who is here,
Known or unknown,
Felt or unfelt.

A God who is near in mundane irritations and frustrations.
A God who is near
When we face unbearable,
Unspeakable,
Unimaginable pain.

Not to fix,
We know that all too well.
But to be intimately active.

This can sound like a platitude
And feel like cold comfort.
It seems like folly.
We cannot make ourselves believe it.

But one element of grace
Is that it comes unbidden,
Unearned.
In this life,
Or beyond it.
No amount of effort can make it happen.
And yet it happens,
Because the infinite beyond,
In a wisdom that seems to us like utter folly,
Has chosen to be intimately active in our lives.

Jesus tried to tell his friends and followers this,
And they did not understand it any better than we do.
And yet they followed him,
As we do,
Because through the mystery,
They heard the whisper of a glimpse of the truth.
And that was enough –
Some of the time.
As it is for us.

And some of the time
They mourned and were comfortless,
As are we.

But they trusted the person
Even when the idea made no sense.
They trusted the person
Who offered a paradox in place of a recipe,
Parables more often than maxims.
And so they kept following,
As do we,
Right down to this moment,
When the blessing is ours.
The blessing, unearned,
Free for all
Regardless of identity or circumstance,
Dwells among us here.

We gather as a community today,
First here and then online at our annual meeting,
To celebrate who we are
And to wonder how we are called to keep on becoming.
We gather to consider together the life of this parish community.

How do we celebrate the blessing that is ours?
Do we show,
Through our care for each other and the world,
That a patient, luminous, and inviting presence
Is intimately active
In the pain and glory of our own lives?
Do we bear witness,
By our fortitude and hope,
To the truth that even when we suffer,
We are not alone?

Sometimes it is hard to remember we are blessed.
We can sink beneath the burdens of our lives and of the word.
But together, in community,
We allow ourselves to question,
We allow ourselves to grieve,
We offer insights and explore the way forward.

What do we have to offer,
In a time of relentless change?
Including, just to name it,
The change that will come with my departure.

In this time,
As in all times,
I believe we are called
To offer as Jesus offered.
We are called to offer blessing first,
Here and now.
Material comfort to those in real material need.
Jesus brought real healing to those in pain
And real food to the hungry.
The hungry,
And those who are hungry for relationship with God.
The poor,
And the poor and downcast in spirit.
Those who bear the burdens of the past.
Those who cannot imagine a good future.
We are called to offer all the comfort and blessing
That has been offered to us.
And we are called to look beyond offering comfort,
To the mending of all harms,
To remember
The words of the prophets,
And to work and wait
For the rolling down of justice like a mighty flood.

And we are called to receive,
As Jesus received,
The presence, active and inviting
Of the mysterious one
Who is beyond and within us,
Here or hereafter,
Known or unknown,
Bidden or unbidden.

I believe
The patient, luminous, and inviting presence is here,
And will keep on coming here.
Whether the doors be open or shut,
Whether the people be ready or not,
The call to follow will keep on coming.

Blessed are those who keep on following,
For they will find
They are on the way.