

Richmond Hill
 Richmond, Virginia
 31 January 2011
 4 Epiphany
 Matthew 5:1-12
 The Beatitudes
 The Rev. B. P. Campbell

The Blessing of God

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

- 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 righteousness' sake, 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. (*Matthew 5:1-12 NRSV*)

Tonight's Gospel is the passage from Matthew's Gospel known as "The Beatitudes." It is the first twelve verses of the Sermon on the Mount, and is perhaps one of the best known passages in Jesus' teaching.

It is very poetic, and it sounds quite profound – but it is not easy to understand for a lot of people. It is haunting, elusive, tantalizing, mysterious: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Tantalizing or not, it seems pretty important that we pay attention to these statements. They are key teachings of our Lord – a door into the world he was trying to open to us – and they may well be a key to much else that he was saying.

So tonight I'd like to give a few reflections on these beatitudes. And here's what I see: The blessings of God are:

1. X-rated
2. Dynamic
3. Under the table

The blessings of God are x-rated, dynamic, and under the table.

1. The blessings of God are x-rated.

I know it's a little crazy to say that the blessings of God are x-rated. But I really haven't discovered any other way to say what it is I'm trying to say here. Some of what Jesus says about the blessings of God here is stuff that you simply can't say directly to

anyone. It is something which is embarrassing. Something which is inappropriate. Something which is actually wrong to say except when the Lord tells you to say it.

These are the kinds of lines I am talking about: Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are those who are persecuted; blessed are you when people revile you; blessed are those who hunger and thirst. These are simply not blessings, and it would be a bad idea, and confusing, to call them such. Mourning is mourning. Poverty is poverty. Persecution is persecution. It is on its surface and in its initial reality like a curse, not a blessing. It is important to know that, and to honor that. Do not go up to someone who is mourning and say, "Your loss is a blessing," or to someone who is being persecuted, "It's great that you are being persecuted," or to someone who is in poverty or depressed and say, "You are lucky to be poor; you are lucky to be depressed." -- even if you think it is true.

No, Jesus is giving a secret here, one which only someone who has experienced the blessing has a right to say. If you have known the blessing which came to you when and because you were poor or poor in spirit; if you have found the blessing through your hunger and thirst; if you have known God's consolation and blessing even in persecution, then you can testify to this incredible salvation.

But otherwise, we'd better not mention it, except to quote the Beatitudes.

Why are things this way? What was Jesus trying to say? If it catches your attention, then you are beginning to see what we are talking about. For the fact is, you can't see it from here, you can't get there from here. All you can do is know, all you can do is recognize, all you can do is remember, or hope, or perhaps, testify, that the Lord has been most visible to you when you were in the greatest need, in the greatest despair. All you can say is that when you went to visit someone whom you thought had the best reason to give up on God, they were the person who was most certain that God had blessed them. All you can do is whisper the secret truth: that God does not desire our misery, he does not desire our poverty our persecution, -- but that his power is shown most dramatically in that he can turn even those horrible situations into blessing for us -- and that is how we know he is victorious over death.

This is x-rated, but it is the opposite of pornographic. It is something that belongs only to those who have known it. It is an unmentionable secret, but a good, unmentionable secret. Don't tell anyone, but discover it with anyone you can.

The blessings of God are x-rated.

2. The blessings of God are dynamic.

What is clear from the Beatitudes is that they relate to an active longing, an active needing, an active searching: hungering, thirsting, needing, seeking comfort, seeking mercy, seeking peace. The blessings are declared in the face of unfulfillment, not fulfillment.

As bookends of the Beatitudes, we have two passages that mention the kingdom of heaven:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven, it appears, is a dynamic state – one in which there is a kind of life which is not static. On the one level we see need, prayer, longing, unfulfillment. And on another level we see blessing. They seem to happen simultaneously, and to be dynamically related to one another: that is to say, the blessing is most obvious in the active needing time. They are concurrent. We are not talking about permanent fixes here. We are talking about being alive in and with God. The kingdom of heaven is dynamic. It is infused with longing.

Jesus has many other teachings which point to this dynamic, living quality of the kingdom of heaven.

- Seek first the kingdom of heaven and all will be added to you.
- Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.
- Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy not sacrifice.
- Follow me.
- You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.
- You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

The kingdom of heaven is about seeking, growing, listening, desiring, following, loving, asking, longing. And if we put these words together, I think we'll see that the kingdom of heaven is about praying – praying is all of these things. Praying is about seeking, growing, listening, desiring, following, loving, asking, longing. The spirit of God is praying and longing with us, and somewhere, somehow, we experience this as the blessing of the kingdom. Something like that.

What is clear is that the blessing is related to the dynamism of need and love, a possibility which is liberated by longing, and that it is known, and can be known, only by those who know their need of God.

The blessings of God are x-rated. The blessings of God are dynamic. And

3. The blessings of God are under the table.

I'm thinking of Jesus' saying: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I come not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Now tell me really, would you rather be righteous or have Jesus? I'd like righteousness, but not the self-righteousness, self-justification, self-satisfaction of the Pharisees which he was addressing in this statement. I'd like to have the righteousness which belongs to Jesus, the one that sets me on the right track not because I'm good, but because I'm beloved and he wants me to be there, and to be his servant.

But you see, I'm under the table. I fell off somewhere along the line – maybe I was always there and just didn't know it.

You all may remember the great story of that mixed-race saint-lady we told the other day:

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter."

The lady got it. We don't know anything about her religious upbringing. We don't know anything about how she knew Jesus was there. We don't know anything, really, about her daughter.

What we do know is that she knew about the blessing under the table. And Jesus recognized, with her, immediately, what she was talking about. She already knew. She was ready. She was ready for an x-rated blessing, she was in that dynamic need of life, and she was under the table. And that's where Jesus was too.

He was hiding among people of a different race, in a distant neighborhood. He was tired of Jews, -- and if there had been some, I'm sure he would have been tired of Christians. Maybe he was just tired of religion. He was tired of people who either had it all together or were pretending they had it all together or were persecuting others so they could try to keep it all together.

He was away, unknown, in a small town, away from the people who knew him.

But this lady searched him out. And not only that, she knew who he was. What do I mean by saying that "she knew who he was?" Not that she knew he was the Messiah. Who knows what her theology was? Not that she knew he was a great rabbi. She wasn't even a Jew.

What she knew was that Jesus knew what it was to be seeking crumbs under the table. That was his territory. He knew what it was like to be there. He knew what it was to be in need of God, to be desperate for food, to need love and hope and blessing and healing. Jesus knew what it was like to fall through the cracks, to be of the wrong race, to have failed miserably at something most important, or to have failed to achieve what seemed essential to life. Jesus knew what it was like to be living this x-rated life and to be longing for the kingdom of heaven.

So down here, under the table, where the crumbs fall, Jesus was involved with the greatest blessing – the blessing of the kingdom. It was a blessing that was open to everyone. It was a blessing that was always shared. If you were the person who needed it or the person who was giving it, it never belonged to either of you. It just belonged to God. When it came, you were both a part of the kingdom of heaven. It was x-rated, dynamic, under the table – full of grace – the beatitude – the blessing of God.

AMEN