

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany/January 29, 2017

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; Matthew 5:1-12;

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"Are You Blessed?"

Are you blessed? Have you ever felt blessed? What was that about? Often we feel blessed by the gifts of life we are fortunate to know or possess, the love of our family, our health, or even our financial well being. Jesus seems to suggest to us today, that in the Kingdom of Heaven, being blessed may be something a bit different.

In today's passage from Matthew, these verses referred to as the "Beatitudes", part of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount", I pictured myself in the company of Jesus and his disciples, walking up that mountain, through the crowds that had gathered to see and hear Jesus speak. And the first line of this passage kept coming back to me. *"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain."* Matthew inserts this little bit of information, information that seems so obvious, that he wouldn't have included it unless he wanted to make a point. So the words, *"Jesus saw the crowds"*, tells me that something special is happening here. That perhaps as he looked upon the people gathered around him, he really looked at them, that he was interested in them and took in the many different faces, their expressions, noting their emotions and their dispositions, noted their physical needs, their ailments, their ways of being. But perhaps mostly, I imagine, he noticed their **eyes** and the light that came from them.

I was imagining Jesus' face too. Probably because I have been watching a number of Jesus movies, as I am preparing for a study I plan to lead this Lent on Jesus' life and ministry, and I was picturing his face and his eyes as he looked around him at the crowds, at those people, each an individual, known by God. And I wondered what he saw as he looked upon them with the **eyes of God**.

I imagine that he saw some who were tired from the journey, some who came with others for healing, some who were unhappy or perhaps complaining about the difficulty of getting there or about the troubles of their times. I imagine he also saw the children playing and parents trying to keep track of them, he saw those who were boisterous and loud, and others who seemed to sink into the background of that entire setting.

And as he prepared to speak, to teach his disciples and all those gathered around, I imagine that he found inspiration from many of those he saw. That he saw within some, that which he was calling the **"Kingdom or Realm of Heaven"**, that they somehow personified that presence of God, or a nearness to that realm, to that essence of life or way of being, that sense of Spirit to which he was calling them.

But those he spoke of were not what anyone would have expected. Wouldn't the Realm of Heaven be filled with the strong and brave, the influential and the powerful, the healthy and wealthy and the beautiful? Isn't this what God's Kingdom should look like? Aren't these the ones everyone saw as blessed by God? Those who had everything going for them, those that knew the blessings of riches and prosperity and well being?

But that is not what Jesus saw. He seemed to see just the opposite. God was present in the poor of spirit, the mourners, the meek and merciful, those who had not received justice but were hungering for things to be made right and fair and equitable in their lives. He saw the Spirit of God in those who were peacemakers and in those who were persecuted for standing up for what is right and just.

Here, in these broken people, a people depressed, discouraged, weighted down by the oppression of their rulers, a people with little hope, he saw something different. So much like the people of Israel who wandered 40 years in the wilderness following Moses to the mountain where he brought to them the commandments of God. So much like the people of Isaiah's time, exiled in a foreign land, yearning for their God. They would see Jesus as Matthew did, as one sent by God. Jesus, the new Moses. Jesus, the prophet of God.

Jesus saw them with a heart filled with the compassion of Isaiah 61, words that were the centerpiece of his mission: *"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the **poor**; he has sent me to bind up the **brokenhearted**, to proclaim liberty to the **captives**, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who **mourn**; to grant to those who mourn in Zion - to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a **faint spirit**; that they may be called **oaks of righteousness**, the planting of the Lord, that God may be glorified."* (Is. 61:1-3)

Jesus saw with the **eyes of God**. There have been times when I've looked upon someone and may have judged them a certain way. Perhaps a stranger who came to my office for assistance whose story I had a hard time believing, or a person with a disability who seemed so different from me, or the one with whom I had a disagreement, whose reasoning and perspective I just could not understand.

But then something happens, where I remind myself, or perhaps it's the Spirit who reminds me, that this person is **loved by God**. Just as they are and just as much as I am, and I see them in a **new light**. I see them in a way I might perceive **God** seeing them, as **beloved**, as **blessed**. And I am given a joy within me. A happiness that seems to cut through all that had separated or come between us just moments before.

And it doesn't matter if I previously had disagreements with them, was angry with them, if I viewed them as somehow different or strange or just incomprehensible, or if I pitied them or viewed them as hopeless or incapable. All of that, all my previously held assumptions, my judgments, just wash away, and I can see someone who is blessed and wonderful and beautiful.

Because you know what I think happens? When I let go of those barriers that keep me separated from another, when I become poor of spirit and don't put myself above, or below another; when I can share in the pain and suffering of one who is in mourning or broken hearted; when I can become meek and be quiet enough to listen carefully and to empathize with another; when I am able to let go of my own agenda or anger and be merciful; when I can see myself in God's eyes and own a humility of heart that seeks love first; and when I am filled with the desire to bring peace rather than to pick a side to be on; and especially when I am willing to suffer and bear persecution for trying to bring God's realm here, and have a deep yearning for true justice and compassion; that is when nothing separates me from that person and we are one. It is in that sense of oneness that I am able to see the **light** in that person's eyes, and know that **I am blessed**.

May we, may our church, seek in all we do, to see with the **eyes of God**, and to be like those Jesus called "**blessed**" as we work to usher in God's realm of love and compassion to this world. Amen.