

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do we really hunger and thirst for righteousness?

Sometimes, perhaps most times, I am not sure....and that is where the Beatitudes hit me this week.

The familiarity of the Beatitudes presents the preacher with a challenge. You may have preconceived ideas of what they are about, or skepticism of my ability to say anything fresh about them. The Beatitudes are pervasive in popular culture, from politics to pop psychology. The spirit and religion message board on "Oprah.com" suggests that it might be enlightening "if we could each of us look within ourselves" and "pick one [beatitude] that showed us who we believed ourselves to be." If we look carefully at Jesus' words, however, we find that they are much more than moral platitudes or mottos to live by.

The Beatitudes introduce the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of Jesus' teachings. Matthew places the Sermon at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus, emphasizing that he is the authoritative teacher of God's people. Jesus breaks into the public arena proclaiming, "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). Then, he calls his first disciples from the task of fishing for fish to the task of fishing for people (verses 18-22).

Then, he shows the disciples what he means by preaching the good news of the kingdom of heaven to people and manifesting its power by healing every kind of disease and affliction (verses 23-25) as the presence of this kingdom of heaven liberates. We have reviewed all that the last three Sundays.

So now, Jesus climbs a mountain with the crowd he has so excited and sits down in the posture of a teacher encircled by his newly-called disciples. They are the primary targets of his instruction in the principles of life in the kingdom of heaven and, in these opening verses of Matthew 5, Jesus teaches about "blessedness", a word tough to get at in the English language and in American culture. The "blessed" are not the "happy" in the sense used in consumer culture to describe pleasure.

The Greek word used here, *makarios*, has a semantic range that includes fortunate, happy, privileged. Indeed, as Jesus describes those who are "blessed," where can you see "happiness" written on any of these lives? So what is Jesus talking about if it is not happiness as our world informs us?

Blessedness seems to be found most often in the hard human experiences of mourning, meekness, peacemaking, persecution, and poverty of spirit. His form of "blessedness" only makes sense in light of the kingdom of God, and his teaching here begins and ends with the kingdom of God. Jesus had already preached that "the kingdom of heaven has come near", so now the kingdom sets a new frame of reference for "blessedness."

What is the point? Within God's life, the God's kingdom, "blessedness" does not depend on wealth or health or status. It is not a reward for righteousness or duty. That should be obvious in light of who he says is blessed.

Instead, blessedness is God's sheer gift. In the realm of God, life is not governed by honor and shame, but by the promise of abundant life. Take the first beatitude, for example. Poverty of spirit bears within it the blessing of life abundant. When one is poor in heart and mind, it really means that one is emptied. Free of clutter. Available and roomy for whatever God reveals to us, assuming that we have the eyes to see, and ears to hear. When we are "wealthy in spirit," we are full of ourselves, eager to display how much we know, how much we can do. Or we are filled up with multi-tasking, preoccupied by busyness, and so there is "no room in the inn" for God to do a new thing.

Blessed, then, are the poor in spirit, these ones not so full of themselves. They show us open lives, available for the mercy that re-orders life in the reign of God. Mercy is the currency of the kingdom of heaven.

Some preachers avoid "kingdom of God" language altogether because it is a political and theological minefield, and I am never comfortable crossing that minefield, being content and satisfied in preaching the words and gospels of Jesus. Matthew has reminded me, when I most need it, of my own inaction in or complacency about God's kingdom. Matthew speaks to me this week and speaks to me in ways that bring me up short. Thank God that God's Word does this sometimes, and causes me to think about ways that I can face up to the questions of the day:

How do I hunger and thirst for righteousness, or do I look the other way? Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness or do I assume someone else will? Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness or do I explain away my perceived indifference because I do not want people to think I take sides, because I choose to play it safe? Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness or keep silent so as not to offend, not to disappoint, in fear of not meeting expectations, or is it because I have yet to find the Spirit's calling to me as to how to engage it?

We need to hunger and thirst for righteousness because our world actively works against it, overrides it, sidelines it, monetizes it, limits it, and assumes that it is overrated and overstated. We have to hunger and thirst for righteousness because even our churches sweep too much under the proverbial rug, making excuses for its inaction so as to protect the powerful at the expense of those victimized.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" wrote this: "There was a time when the church was very powerful -- in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days, the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society... If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning..."

The Beatitudes are a call to action for the sake of creating the world God imagines, a call to join a radical kingdom. He gives us a radical vision to match, that the kingdom of heaven infiltrates our present. We can continue to proclaim the good news of the kingdom at great cost to ourselves, fighting oppressive powers in the name of Jesus. We can suffer for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, with the assurance that God has the last word. When we see people receiving the word of God, and finding healing and freedom in his name we can announce, "the kingdom of heaven has drawn near."

We can begin to see why Jesus is telling the beaten, the weak, the oppressed, the destitute, that the kingdom of God is theirs...because it illustrates the love and care that God the Father has for all.

As we continue within the season of Epiphany, as we move from the birth of Jesus, to his baptism, and then to the Sermon on the Mount, the picture of Jesus starts to take shape. We begin to see more and more clearly this Jesus of Nazareth, this God Incarnate, and the new way of life he proclaims. Not only in the manger, but also in his teaching, God is revealed. In the ways this kingdom works, the way this household is run, in its values and priorities, God is made known.

This revelation of God's life is an invitation that calls for a response. If we choose to follow Jesus into God's abundant life, we will conform to the way this kingdom works, its values and priorities. We are born and reborn into new relationship with God, with each other and with God's creation.

May each of us be touched by the spirit of God, calling us in our hearts to make that response to follow Jesus...asking God, as he did, to make or transform us into the person that God calls and wants us to be. Then we will come to begin the real spiritual journey of our life, the life that we were called to have, entering into the loving communion of God, known to us in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.