

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Epiphany 4A
January 29, 2023
Matthew 5:1-12

The Blessed One

Seeing the crowds, [Jesus] went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . ." (Matthew 5:1-3 ESV)

Dearly Beloved in Christ:

Epiphany is a season where Jesus is revealed as fully and completely and eternally God. Today's Gospel reveals Jesus's divinity as He tells you things that only God can tell you, that only God can know, and that you can believe only after God gives you His miraculous gift of faith.

So, don't be misled by false teachers who say that these Beatitudes are calling for some kind of attitude adjustment, that if you have or exhibit the right kind of attitudes, then you will be blessed, as though God's blessings are earned or deserved. They imply, if they don't outright say it, that if you do your part, then God will do His. Likewise, they often teach that God wants us to be happy.

Jesus teaches us otherwise. He declares something which is already true. Yet, what Jesus says seems contrary to human reason and senses. After all, no one on the street would ever say, "I am blessed because I feel inwardly empty, like I have nothing to give anybody and must rely completely on others for everything." No, our human sense of worth compels us to make a contribution – or at least to want to make a contribution.

Jesus says, "Forget it." Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That is to say, God considers you to be in the best possible position when you are completely helpless in His work of salvation, and when you stop trying to make your contribution or do your part in the work that only He can do for you. Blessed are you who are poor in spirit, you who realize your sinfulness and utter helplessness to do anything about it, you who realize that you are so empty inside that you cannot even feel religious. Yours is the kingdom of heaven because you must, and do, rely on Jesus and Him only. You can't do anything and Jesus does it all.

Life in this world is not all rainbows and lollipops, or smiles and giggles. Bad stuff happens. You mourn - over loved ones who have died; over your sin and the sin which so permeates the world - and Jesus gives you comfort beyond all understanding. No matter what you endure in this life, and no matter what you shall lose, you shall be comforted. God the Son

promises you that your losses shall become gains. You shall be comforted when the dark night of your struggle dawns in the morning light of the Last Day resurrection, earned for you by Christ's own resurrection from the dead.

Are you humble? Are you meek? If you answer, "Yes," then you're really not. And if you answer, "No," then you admit it. So, Jesus speaks something impossible to you when He says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Your humility comes about only by a miracle of God. You become meek only when God's condemning Law crushes you and when it forces you to realize how impoverished of spirit you are and how grievous is your condition. But when God forces you into meekness by His Word, and when your old self gets crucified with all of its sins and evil desires, then God regards you as blessed. Then you are blessed because God loves to pick you up from such a state, wiping you clean of all your sins, and giving you a place of honor in His Kingdom and Church. With such meekness, you shall inherit the earth - not this sin-spoiled earth, but the new earth which will be ushered in at our Lord's return.

Jesus continues, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Without God speaking to us in His Law (Rom. 2:14-15) and His Gospel (Romans 3:21-22), none of us would ever perceive our persistent unrighteousness, much less hunger and thirst for God's righteousness. But Jesus speaks two miracles and two promises in this Beatitude. First, He speaks about the miracle that you perceive a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Through the Word of God, the Holy Spirit has entered your heart and your mind and He has revealed to you that there is nothing there that may be considered righteous- "nothing good" as St. Paul says. (Romans 7:18). But then, after Jesus points to your unrighteousness, He also promises you, "You shall be satisfied, filled." Your hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be filled through the hearing of the Word, through eating the Lord's Supper, through your leaving life on this earth to dwell eternally with God where there shall be no more hunger (Rev. 7:16).

While life often appears harsh and nasty, Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Yet mercy does not adhere to our sinful hearts and minds. Only self-preservation does. Just as it is written, "We love because [God] first loved us" (1John 4:1), so also may it be said, "We show mercy only because God first showed mercy to us." Your ability to show mercy is a divinely-given ability; it is a matter of faith, declaring your divinely-given conviction that God shall yet show mercy to you when you are called to account before His throne.

Now, if you honestly examine your own heart, you will see only impurity and sin. If you pass judgment about the way you struggle in this life, you will be tempted to think your struggles indicate that God is not actually at peace with you, that He is angry with you, and that you owe Him something. But none of that is true. Jesus the Son of God looks at you in a way you could never see yourself: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" and "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." Your blessedness in the eyes of God has come to you, not because you figured out how to purify your own heart, but because God Himself declares to you right now that your heart is purified by Jesus' death for your sins.

Blessedness is yours, not because you figured out a way to make peace with God, but because God declares peace with you on account Jesus' sacrificial death for your sake.

Then Jesus says that you who are so blessed, will be persecuted and suffer on account of Christ. And this is a good thing. It is a good thing for people to look down their noses at you for what seems like an over-dependence on Jesus or a seemingly fanatical commitment to the pure Word of God, to Baptism, and Holy Communion. It is a good thing when other Christians consider you hard-hearted or old-fashioned because you will not throw away the clear words of Scripture and welcome a more "modern" Christianity in your pews, which is really no Christianity at all (Gal. 1:6-7). It is a good thing when it seems like the entire world hates you on account of the Christian faith God has given to you. So suffered the prophets and other believers before you. Yet, for all of their hatred and condescension and religious bigotry against you, God's promise to you cannot and will not be taken away: "yours is the kingdom of heaven."

Yes, today's Gospel is a very good Epiphany Gospel because it reveals to you that Jesus truly is God the Son, the One who speaks the Word of God to you from the very heart of God. By revealing His divinity to you, through speaking in this way, Jesus says things to you and about you that you could never know otherwise. In other words, this Gospel shows you who you are by first revealing who Jesus is.

You are God's blessed ones. You may not feel blessed in the midst of your poverty of spirit, your mourning over losses, your humility, or your hunger and thirst for righteousness. You may not feel blessed in these things, but in these things you are blessed indeed because God says you are blessed. You might not walk around feeling in your heart the sort of mercy, purity, and peace that are spoken about here. Be that as it may: you are truly the blessed ones of God because the Father has shown you mercy in Christ His Son, making you able to be merciful. He has purified your hearts with the forgiveness of sins, so that you shall see God. He has made peace with you through death and resurrection, and in so doing He has named you "sons of God." So, "rejoice and be exceedingly glad, [even in the midst of trials and tribulations], for great is your reward in heaven." Thus says your Lord Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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