

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

It sounds so simple: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. However, on closer inspection, are these instructions really so simple after all? How can we be sure we are seeking God's justice and not our own? How are we to love kindness and not merely like niceness? How do we walk in humility without feeling humiliated?

Fortunately, we have an excellent teacher and guide: Jesus Christ. His teachings on the mountain in Galilee are some of his best-known words. The Beatitudes, the "Blesseds" are perhaps the most famous of all.

When we pay attention to the future tense - "they will be comforted, they will inherit, they will be filled" - it's easy to hear these sayings as a series of promises, a series of rewards to be allotted in the afterlife, or in the new creation at the end of times. Doubtless those promises will hold true in the new creation, but, is that enough consolation to us now, when we mourn, or hunger, or are persecuted? As a disillusioned man in a song by Sting says of inheriting the earth, "What good is a used-up world, and how can it be worth having?"

Perhaps Jesus is also calling us to a deeper and more challenging understanding. Twice he says, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Just a bit earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, we are told that from the beginning of his teaching, Jesus proclaimed that "the kingdom of heaven has come near." Jesus tells us that the

kingdom is near, is at hand, is so close we can reach out and touch it.

If the kingdom is truly at hand, then all the blessings Jesus mentions, are not afterlife consolation prizes, but are present-tense realities. That being the case, the Beatitudes should read like this: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they have the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they are being comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they are inheriting the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they are being filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they are receiving mercy.

In this light, the blessings become both strength and guidance for doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God.

Justice in our earthly kingdoms, typically uses the tools of punishment and making amends. Applied well, our justice systems protect the innocent, shield the vulnerable, and ensure equality. Applied poorly, they protect the powerful and disproportionately condemn the weak.

Justice in the kingdom of heaven, relies on the mercy and righteousness of God. Our Baptismal Covenant calls us to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” Our tools for this heavenly justice system are mercy, righteousness and peacemaking. If we use these tools to do justice, look at the blessings that follow: receiving mercy, being filled, being called children of God!

Better yet, the blessings are not only a reward to us, but also a source of motivation and guidance. Because we have received God’s mercy, we have a model for being merciful, and we have the desire to extend mercy. Because we have been forgiven and restored to peace with God, we are strengthened to forgive

others and to work for peace and reconciliation. Because we are filled with God's spirit, we hunger and thirst more and more to see righteousness in the world.

But what about the times when it's hard to see righteousness in the world, when we ourselves are persecuted, or when we are in mourning, or when we feel empty in our own spirit or feel that God has abandoned us? Jesus assures us that blessings are present even in the midst of these times. Perhaps he's even teaching us that at such moments we are most open to recognizing and receiving the grace of God.

In the midst of persecution and slander, Jesus calls us to rejoice and be glad, for we are walking in the kingdom of heaven, as well as in an unjust world. When we mourn, and are tossed by our natural and right emotions of grief and anger, how vivid are those moments when the presence and compassion of God break through! Walking in the kingdom of heaven, means learning more and more how close God is to us when we are in need. Jesus even assures us that we have the kingdom of heaven just when we feel poorest in spirit. Just when we feel the emptiest, he says, keep reaching out to the kingdom that is at hand. In other words, walk humbly with our God.

Humility is all about letting go of our need to know and to control. When we can finally let go of asking why we must grieve, why we must feel alone, why we must witness and experience evil in the world, when we are given the blessing of letting go and keeping silence before God, then we find anew that God is walking by our side. To be meek is to set aside the sense of our own power; when we stop trying to control our surroundings, we rediscover our own freedom to enjoy the gift of the world.

The Beatitudes call us, above all, to a sense of openness before

God. We don't see God until we see the face of Christ in others, we learn to do that by pursuing justice and kindness toward all people. We don't see God until we stop trying to control, and begin learning to walk humbly in God's presence. But when we practice doing justice and loving kindness and walking in humility, the Spirit continues to work in our hearts, purifying us.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they are seeing God. So it may never be easy, but perhaps it is simple after all. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with our God. Walk in the kingdom of heaven, be comforted, inherit the earth, be filled with righteousness, receive mercy, see God, be God's children, rejoice and be glad. Be blessed.

AMEN.