

## EPIPHANY FOUR, YEAR A, JANUARY 29, 2023

When we hear the Beatitudes, most of us probably picture a bucolic pastoral setting on a hill with people at Jesus' feet looking adoringly up at him and hanging onto every word he says as that is how many artists have depicted it. I visited the Galilean area over 40 years ago and it is an urban area teeming with people, poverty and unrest. Now the supposed site of the Sermon on the Mount is a touristy picturesque place in the midst of this very populated area that overlooks the Sea of Galilee and, yes, there is a church on the site. The ruins of the first church built in the 4th century, which was used for 300 years, are on the slope with the most recent church built on top of the hill. The Church of the Beatitudes, is an elegant octagonal building that was built in 1938. The eight sides of the church represent the eight beatitudes. What is probably one of the more fascinating details about this church is that it was partly financed by the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. Think about that for a moment. There is a real irony to the fact that these 8 sayings of Jesus that were and are considered counter revolutionary were addressed to the poor and marginalized of society and were the very ones Mussolini in his regime kept suppressed.

But let me go back to the area of Galilee where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. Our idea that all of Galilee was peaceful hills and landscapes really doesn't describe first century Palestinian Galilee any more than they describe Galilee today. A PBS documentary stated "While often portrayed as a bucolic backwater, Galilee was known for political unrest, banditry and tax revolts." So, in reality, Galilee was a hotbed of economic uncertainty and political instability. It was a volatile environment and a place of anxiety and fear.

It is also interesting to note that in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is always going to Galilee. He didn't just mean a physical place. When Jesus goes to Galilee it is a metaphor for being in the midst of all the uncertainties, turmoil and angst that life brings. It's not an accident that Jesus was in Nazareth of Galilee when he first defined his ministry, quoting the words of Isaiah: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. It's not an accident that the Sermon on the Mount is set in Galilee: Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom, etc. Jesus spent most of his time in the rural communities and peasant villages of lower Galilee with those who were "the other," with those on the margins of society and sometimes on the margins of hope.

The beatitudes were very specific to the people of this region. Our notion of who is blessed and what it means to be happy is vastly different than what we hear in the beatitudes. Every society in every age has a way of saying, "Blessed are you." Actually, the word "blessed," in the original Greek is congratulations! Societies hold up a particular image or group of people and say, "These are the ones who have made it! These are the ones to be congratulated." In Jesus' time if you were wealthy it was a sign that God had blessed you for following the laws and commandments. It didn't take into account those who also followed the rules and were not wealthy.

Not much has changed for us today. Social media, influencers, advertisers all publish thousands of slogans of who will count or make it in the world. Think about the subtle messages that we, our children and grandchildren, get bombarded with on a daily basis. We need to be thin, young, healthy, on certain social media platforms, financially

stable for us to be successful or worthy. Society has always had standards that we're supposed to live up to otherwise we have failed. I recently heard that the actress Jamie Lee Curtis said she was tired of all the anti aging beauty products on the market because they don't allow people to accept all the wrinkles, etc that comes with aging. We let others dictate to us what makes a person beautiful or wonderful instead of acknowledging that we define who we are. However, the negativity still pervades our very beings that we not only believe what others say but we even perpetuate the negatives ourselves even when we have so much positives to live by.

By today's standards our happiness is measured by health, money and security. But, none of these you will find in the Beatitudes. The things Jesus blessed were quite different. Jesus blessed those with a big heart, people who are humble and gentle who shun control. He blessed those who are open to the power of God, looking to the future and not to the past. And, he blessed those who endure in spite of adversity.

Jesus turns everything around. It is as if winning and losing, promotion or demotion, education or illiteracy make no difference in his eyes or the eyes of God. Each of us, no matter our position in life, no matter what we know or do, whom we root for or vote for, is blessed by God. God's original blessing is offered to us all, and it is this:

You are accepted. You are accepted by God as a child of God. You are embraced by God not for what you have made of yourself, but for what God has made of you.

It is a backwards blessing. It couldn't be more backwards. And it was backwards to that crowd for the same reason it is backwards to us. Jesus is showing us a new vision, a new way of seeing. In the eyes of God, these are the ones who are blessed. And those whom the world blesses and those whom God blesses are not necessarily the same.

It was shocking then. It is shocking now. But it was good news then. And I believe it is good news now. We are free from the judgments of society's definition of success. We don't have to accomplish 101 things before breakfast to receive God's acceptance. We are, at birth, loved by God.

Yet we often forget this birthright, this blessing of God that Jesus described in his sermon on the kingdom of God. We tend to trust more the blessings of society. At times we are so distracted by the promises and congratulations of the world around us that we forget God's original blessing within us: You are accepted. You are blessed. In God's blessing, your heart is made pure, you thirst for peace, you long for righteousness.

There is an Episcopal church meme that shows Jesus saying, I gave them the Beatitudes and all they do is quote Leviticus. In other words, we can't seem to embrace that we are accepted but rather concentrate on all that we think is wrong.

The obvious question is how do we believe this acceptance? How do we make the leap from needing to be "what society says we should be" to being convinced that we are loved and accepted by God?

Remember what Jesus said. He said, Blessed. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Eight times he says it. He doesn't say blessed are you if . . . but blessed are you because. Because you are loved. Believe it. That's all there is left to do. Believe it, that the love God has for you has made you hunger for what is right, has made your heart pure, has made you humble.

Believe it. And that's why we are here. For every ounce of you that can't believe, there's an ounce of you that can believe it. Together as the body of Christ, perhaps we can believe that God's original blessing for us has blessed us already.

Believe it. For today, Jesus says to us:  
Blessed are you who know God's love, for you will not only hunger and thirst for righteousness but you will live it.  
Blessed are you who accept the love of God, for God's grace will purify your heart.  
Blessed are you who know God's forgiveness, for you will not only long for reconciliation with God and with your brothers and sisters but seek it out.  
Blessed are you who see the magnificence of God, for you will be humble.  
Blessed are you who know God's acceptance, for you will be able to endure any rejection society throws at you and refuses to congratulate you.  
Blessed are you who not only long for this vision but step out into audacious faith for you shall and are called children of God.  
Believe it. Amen.