

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
October 29, 2017
Matthew 5:1-12

Have any of you seen the movie “The Life of Brian” by Monty Python? I hesitate to recommend it because it is a parody of Jesus’ life and some people find it insulting and irreverent. I think it has some very good insights into life at that time Jesus lived and what people today might have against Christianity. The reason I bring it up is because there is a scene in it based on the Sermon on the Mount from which we get the Beatitudes. Jesus, or Brian in this case, has gone up the mountain and his disciples and a crowd have followed him. He starts to teach and those who are at a distance can’t hear very well. He is saying, “Blessed are the.....,” and giving examples of who is blessed, or made holy. One man at the fringe of the crowd, straining to hear, asks, “What did he just say?” and his neighbour replies, “I think he said, ‘Blessed are the cheesemakers,” to which another remarks, “I think he’s referring to manufacturers of all kinds.”

It’s funny because that’s essentially the telephone game we played when we were kids. You sit in a circle and one person whispers something into the ear of their neighbour who does the same until the message has travelled through the ears and tongues of many people and often the resulting message is so warped and different from the original that it can be hilarious.

But the Beatitudes in today’s gospel is definitely not a random list of the kinds of people who are blessed. It is a list that builds on

each characteristic of a person who is being transformed on the inside through the grace of God.

Sometimes this personal transformation comes about through a lifetime of devotion to God. Other times, it comes when someone's heart is opened up suddenly – either through falling in love, or through tragedy and suffering. Just this week, I heard the story of someone who had attended church and been involved in the parish community all their life, but through a series of upsetting events, was suddenly woken up and saw beyond the activities of church to the heart of God and the love that pierces through all suffering.

So in this Sermon on the Mount Jesus is teaching his disciples how to adopt the posture towards God and others that will deepen relationship, and builds a person's capacity for wisdom, compassion and love.

The first verse tells us the initial crucial movement towards this state of blessedness, of becoming holy. Matthew tells us that after Jesus sat down, "his disciples came to him." As I just said, whether through a life-long commitment to spending time with God, or through a sudden awakening, it is clear then that transformation begins with the willingness *to come to God*. Our good works are not going to do the trick. We have to spend time at the feet of Jesus, ready to listen, ready to learn. Like Mary, we have to discern the more important thing – which may seem like a waste of time, but in essence is the most important thing – to take time away from the busyness of our lives, from all the demands of others, and spend time in quiet,

focused on God. This is why every convent and monastery has regular prayer time and the people living there learn how to stop whatever they are doing and go to prayer. I remember when I spent a month living with the sisters at the Convent of St. John the Divine in Toronto, the bell would ring and it was a challenge for me to stop what I was doing and head directly to the chapel for prayer. It took a few days but soon I saw the wisdom of interrupting what I was doing to be reminded that the most important thing was my relationship with God, and it was essential to nurture that relationship. And I needed to be reminded many times a day because my attention kept being side-tracked into my own ideas and my own plans and my own sense of my importance. What began as frustration became such a source of peace and a sense of well being.

So.... once we position ourselves in an open attitude, Jesus teaches how the inner transformation happens. This transformation is the work of our lives here on earth; and the fruits of the work, of the growth we experience bring peace and well-being.

Blessed are the poor in spirit is the first descriptor. Humility is holy; it acknowledges that God is the source of everything. When we remember this, we bring everything to God; we offer up our suffering, we bring our needs, we pray for others. And the kingdom of heaven is what we receive – the kingdom here on earth and the kingdom after.

Blessed are those who mourn. When we know that everything comes from God; it hurts us to see how the world is. How much unnecessary suffering we cause each other, how we abuse Creation,

how we don't acknowledge or receive the love and abundance God so freely gives. And in acknowledging our sinfulness, we are comforted.

Blessed are the meek – those who are gentle and kind. My husband has a t-shirt that says “Don't mistake kindness for weakness.” We don't like the idea of being obedient to God, yet the saints we know and admire were able to withstand adversity with a peaceful spirit. The world needs more of this kind of God-centredness!

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Once a person values what God values, the action that follows is to be expected. They work for justice in the world, they speak out against racism, they work to help the poor. And this is the most satisfying work – those whose work is an expression of their love for God and neighbour find real satisfaction.

Blessed are the merciful. The word “mercy” derives from the same word that “merchant” does. The Divine exchange is about giving and receiving. Never hoarding; never clinging. It requires a profound trust in the Divine. The Holy Spirit is a perfect example of this exchange where the Father pours out to the son, who pours out to the Holy Spirit in a continual exchange of love that none can or do hold on to. It isn't in their nature to. Neither is it in ours. And when we begin to engage with this form of exchange, passing on what has been given to us, we see that, indeed, we have received, and continue to, and will always, receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. The more we create space for God to fully inhabit our being, putting on the mind of Christ, fully engaging in the body of Christ, we will recognize who and whose we are. Unlike the writers of the Hebrew Bible where it was said that no one could see the face of God and live, Jesus turns this on its head and says the more room we make in our hearts for God, the closer we get to seeing God.

And then Jesus tells us that our fate is the same as his, if we follow God all the way. We may be persecuted, we will be reviled and have false charges levelled against us. When you stand for something, there will be those who will want to bring you down. We shouldn't be surprised, the one we follow, Jesus, was the perfect example of who we want to be, and we all know what happened to him.

So, in 10 short verses, Jesus outlines the way to God. And ends with the reassurance that the rewards of a life dedicated to God and neighbour are not the same as the ones of this earth. But the one who prepares his heart, who opens her heart and the one who does the inner work, will be able to rejoice and be glad, even in face of adversity because their hearts will be God-shaped and they will be living in the heart of the Trinity, in the constant and eternal flow of love.

Amen.