

Have you ever stopped and wondered; “Who is this Jesus and why am I following him, just where is he leading me and what kind of life am I going to have if I do follow him?” These are just some of the questions we should be asking ourselves during Epiphany, the season set aside for us in the church year to discover for the first time, or again what it means for us to be in relationship with God and with God’s son Jesus.

It feels like AGES since we have left Advent and the Christmas season behind, it even feels like a long time since the start of Epiphany, so indulge me please in doing a quick review of what **has** happened in order to be ready for what **will** happen.

The arrival of the Magi started the season, revealing Christ to the whole world, reminding us that Immanuel, God is with us, was not a promise for a few but to all. The journey continued with Jesus’ baptism and the calling of the first disciples and last week left us standing on the brink of ministry. Today we are introduced for the first time to the teaching ministry of Jesus with the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:1-12 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

5 When Jesus[a] saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely[b] on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

May God bless to our understanding the words that we hear today.

Will you pray with me please? May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The scripture that we read today is known as the beatitudes. It is one of those grace moments in scripture, stirring us, stinging us, clearly and cleanly claiming us. But it is rarely heard that way. Instead we hear it as a list of shoulds and oughts - calling us to a kind of life we are not able or willing to live. After all, who willingly wants to be poor, meek, mournful or persecuted? As much as we need to be comforted and filled, as much as we want blessing and mercy, as much as we yearn to be the precious children of God, we're not sure it is worth the cost. Or is it?

Just prior to this passage, we heard about the call to the disciples, those twelve bewildered fishermen and tax collectors who have suddenly been claimed, dragged, invited, beguiled into living and learning and leaving everything they

knew and understood to go with Jesus. As captivated as they are by this call they still aren't sure what it means. So, this morning Jesus takes them away on retreat - to the mountaintop - to teach them. In his way, he is giving the disciples their charge for ministry, helping them to understand where he is coming from and where he will be taking them on this life changing journey. These eleven Beatitudes represent a challenge for those gathered at his feet, they represent a change of mind and a change of heart. In his own way, Jesus is letting his disciples know that they are being called to ministry, they are being called into something special. They are truly being called to follow Jesus.

We are a church that believes in inclusivity, so it's kind of a surprise for us to understand that these words, these familiar beatitudes, aren't for everybody. They are for disciples, for those of us who are serious about following Jesus, captivated but still confused by what the call means. If we don't begin there, in the heart of committed discipleship, then the words will make very little sense at all.

Now, let us be sure we know what the words are about. They are not about shoulds and oughts. Not about working and doing. They are about blessing. Jesus begins with the blessings that are already ours. This passage, this prologue to the Sermon on the Mount, is not about what will be. It is about what already is. This passage does not tell us that God will be good to us. It tells us that God is already good to us. It does not suggest that the kingdom will come - someday. It proclaims, with great joy, that the kingdom of God is already here. This passage does not say that we have to act in certain ways in order to be blessed; instead it celebrates the reality that because we are already blessed, we are empowered to act in certain ways.

Right here is the reality check of our imperfect lives, God is blessing us and loving us. Despite our titles and our public smiles, despite our bank accounts, big or small

despite the length of our resumé, despite all the acquired riches of the world, we know, if we are really honest, at a deep level, that we are very poor in spirit, that our lives are filled with sadness. We know that, as much as we want to be in charge, we are utterly dependent upon the grace of God to make it through the night. We know that our meager efforts to find peace in a violent and turbulent world make little difference. We know that when we really stick up for what we believe and what we value, the power brokers of this world will laugh at us and pass us by.

And this my friends, is where we need to go back and ask ourselves those opening questions. “Just who is this Jesus and why am I following him? The answer starts to become clear if we can place ourselves, see ourselves as part of that small band of disciples mysteriously pulled out of the crowd and gathered at the feet of Jesus. As much as we like inclusiveness, this is an exclusive gathering meant for those who are ready to deepen their relationship with God. Anyone can join but you have to be ready for what comes next, you have to be ready to have more than a nodding acquaintance with this Jesus guy, you need to be ready to learn to be an alternative melody of grace in a graceless world - if we can see ourselves that way - then we are ready because we understand that we are already the broken, needy, vulnerable people described by the beatitudes. And it is because of that brokenness, because of that neediness, that we are blessed. This, believe it or not, is the good news of the gospel.

Some time ago on National Public Radio, there was an editorial about inspirational calendars. The commentator suggested that the very same people who are caught up in the spinning cycles of secular success are also the people watching *Touched by an Angel* and reading *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. And they - we - are the ones buying all those tear-off inspirational calendars with daily pithy quotes, so that

when we hit rock bottom today, we can tear it off and find something tangible to keep us going tomorrow.

As tough and together as we appear to be to others, we are as needy and impoverished of spirit as any of the people taught and touched by Jesus. And it is that very neediness that invites and receives God's blessings. It is that very neediness that provides the fertile soil for our spiritual life to grow. And if we can accept and rejoice that it is in our neediness that God's blessings are bestowed, then we can begin to embrace the neediness of others and become a blessing to them.

How can we begin to understand that these blessings are for us? Maybe hearing them another way might help. The beatitudes as we have heard them and learned them are not the most correct translation. The Greek, which is the language the New Testament was written in does not read "Blessed are " but instead, "O the blessedness of."

O the blessedness of our utter dependence on God, for that dependence ushers us into God's heart.

O the blessedness of our deep, deep sadness, for it is in that sadness that God can touch and fill and comfort us.

O the blessedness of our humility, for it is in humility that we find abundance.

O the blessedness of our yearning for the good, for that hunger can be fed by God's grace.

O the blessedness of our generosity, for generosity is the sweetness of God's love.

O the blessedness of whatever justice and harmony we can create, for peace is the reflection of God's face.

O the blessedness of suffering and struggle, for joy is the fruit of adversity.

Rejoice and be glad in the reality of our living, for it is in that reality that God is building a kingdom of love.

To put it simply the beatitudes can be summarized very simply, You are love! Go out and act like it! Halleluiah Amen