

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
January 29, 2017 Epiphany 4/Year A
Texts --Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

If you've ever spent time living in the south, you've probably had this experience. You're in the grocery check-out line at PubliK's or Pigly Wigley or Food Lion. All your groceries have been rung up and the cashier hands you the receipt and says, "Y'all need some help with your buggy?" (Translation: Do you need some help getting the groceries to your car?) You say, "No, I can manage. Thanks." And then come the final departing words: "OK. Y'all have a blessed day."

The first time I heard that I thought, "I don't think I'm in Kansas anymore. Certainly not New Jersey."

Have a blessed day. It sounds really nice, especially to a Christian. But northerners have to be careful when a southerner throws a blessing their way. "Bless your heart" sounds innocent enough, and indeed it might be. But it also might be a polite way of saying, "You really have no idea what a fool you are, do you?"

Have a blessed day. What does it mean exactly? I hope things go well for you today? I hope the weather is good? I hope all your dreams come true? What really does it mean to be blessed, or to give a blessing?

Today's gospel gives us the mantra of blessings. The Beatitudes from Matthew's gospel may constitute the best-known passage in the New Testament. And it's not only Christians who admire these blessings. People who have never darkened the door of a church probably have some awareness of them. They're attractive to many in part because they can be seen as nuggets of universal wisdom, not necessarily attached to any religious tradition; you don't need God to sense the power in them. People of other faiths are drawn to them, too. Mahatma Gandhi, the great Indian leader, often praised the Beatitudes, and saw them and the entire Sermon on the Mount as a good reflection of his own Hindu values. Several decades ago, the famous television preacher, Robert Schuller, wrote a best-selling book, *The Be (Happy) Attitudes*, a popular self-help manual based on the Beatitudes that describes the kinds of internal attitudes we need to nurture in order to be happy people. Apparently, the Beatitudes are useful to many people. And that's a good thing. Have a blessed day.

But I fear many of us, including the most faithful, best-intentioned people, might have missed an important element in the Beatitudes. As is often the case, a lot hinges on a word. In this case, the word is blessed, the one that's repeated nine times in this passage. Sometimes it's translated "happy," as in "happy are the poor in spirit." I have to admit, that never quite made sense to me.

Maybe this is why. There's been some important recent scholarly discussion about that word, "blessed," that suggests a better translation would be to the English word, "honored," as in "Honored are the poor in spirit. Honored are those who mourn. Honored are the meek. Honored are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Honored are the merciful. Honored are the pure in heart. Honored are the peacemakers. Honored are those who are persecuted."

Hear the difference? No longer are the Beatitudes a collection of nuggets of universal wisdom. No longer are they a useful way to draw in unbelievers. No longer are they a simple prescription for inner happiness. Instead, they paint a picture of those God pays attention to. And they are a challenge to us to pay attention in the same way; to see those who most often are dismissed, avoided, and dishonored as in fact honored in the eyes of God. One commentator puts it this way:

Jesus gathers in all of these people who are completely bereft and without honor in their culture's eyes, and he gives them two gifts which more than compensate for their very real losses. He gives them honor. And he makes them family. They are children of one Father, and that makes them brothers and sisters. They will never be bereft in a community that sees themselves as family, and that

cares for one another in ways that show that they take that family relationship with utmost seriousness. (Sarah Dylan Breuer)

That honor given to those without honor in the wider culture, and that declaration that these honored are an integral part of God's family – these are not new insights of Jesus. They are at the heart of the prophetic stream we have inherited from our Jewish ancestors. We see it in the other greatest hit from the Bible that comes our way today, that powerful line from the Prophet, Micah. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The verse is not an isolated sentiment stuck in the corner of the writing of a minor prophet. It is an accurate summary of one of the most fundamental themes repeated by the prophets. We hear it echoed in Isaiah: "Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1: 17). And perhaps most famously in Amos: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5: 24).

Progressive Christians love these verses because they seem to support the commitment to social justice near and dear to our hearts. They were favorites of Martin Luther King, Jr. And rightly so. But we need to be a little careful here not to do what we accuse other Christians of doing, that is, finding favorite proof-texts for our favorite public policy or political candidate.

On the other hand, we simply cannot ignore that the prophets and Jesus articulate something of a plumb-line by which people of faith might gauge where our society stands in relationship to God's vision. Millions of people of good will got a wake-up call last November when we had to confess that we had been missing the mark when it came to a whole host of people who, slowly but surely, had been forgotten, dishonored, and pushed to the margins of our society – almost as throw-aways. They indeed found their voice, and they let it be heard. May it be a lesson to all of us.

The question now is whether in our efforts to address that sin we will commit the same sin by forgetting and dishonoring others, and pushing them to the margins. Does this have to be a zero-sum game?

Biblical justice is never a matter of dishonoring some – or worse, scapegoating some – as a way of honoring others. It's about genuinely honoring, from the inside out, *all* those our world casts aside, raising them up and embracing them as brothers and sisters, essential to the family of God.

Perhaps we are being given an opportunity to expand our thinking a bit. What if, in addition to reaching out through acts of charity we also reached out with expressions of honor? What if we truly saw those on the other side of the perennial tracks as part of the same family of God? What would that look like? What if we gave the same honor to those who struggle with their relationship with God or who have no relationship with God as we do to those who have steadfast faith? What if we gave the same honor to those who sometimes lack the strength to be upbeat and jolly in the face of hardship as we do to those who put up a strong demeanor and a happy face? What if we gave the same honor to those who challenge us to be a more just society as we do to the corporations whose names are displayed on sporting arenas? What if we gave the same honor to those who work tirelessly to cease our contributions to the world's violence as we do to those whose first response to violence is more violence? What if the household of God had no stratifications? What would our world look like if Christians everywhere honored those whom Christ and the prophets honor? What if we really saw what God has always seen?

Perhaps we would all have a blessed day.