

Sermon for Epiphany 4A
Sunday, January 29, 2023
“The Beatitudes: Advice for Happy Living”

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, & Holy Spirit. Amen.

I presume that the words of today’s gospel are familiar to most of you. They are The Beatitudes from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. The word “beatitudes” comes from the Latin word that begins each bullet point that Jesus makes: *beati*, meaning, ‘blessed.’ It conveys the sense of being happy, being contented, being satisfied, being reassured; and those states of being are models of daily living for us. The Beatitudes should invite us, move us, compel us to be better people. When we hear or read the Beatitudes, we should ask ourselves, “What from among Jesus’s words am I taking to heart?” “What is my ‘be’ attitude?” Jesus’s advice in his sermon gives us hope when life gets difficult, unbearable, even tragic, and it gives us advice on how to be better people toward each other; it is a lesson on how to be.

We live in a world and in a culture that often measures success by the amount of material things one possesses or by how much power and influence one seems to have. But, occasionally faithful people emerge among us, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Ghandi, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, St. Teresa of Ávila, St. John of the Cross, St. Peter, St. Paul, for example, who take the Beatitudes to heart and live them out. These and the other people whom we call saints were ordinary women and men that had shortcomings, they weren’t perfect, but despite their human brokenness and occasional dark nights of their souls, found their inner light of Christ, that spark of God, which enabled them to make an impact in their own times and a lasting influence upon humankind. They lived the Beatitudes.

The times in which we live, the world which we inhabit is choked with brokenness and sin. Thousands of people are dying in Ukraine because of the violent, selfish actions of another sovereign nation. Palestinians in Israel and elsewhere are repeatedly being denied their rights by God’s chosen people in the very homeland of Our Lord, and respond by inciting senseless violence against their brother and sister human beings in their most sacred spaces. Law enforcement officers in Memphis, some of whom probably identify as faithful Christians, robbed Tyre Nichols of his human dignity, beat him, kicked him, left him helpless and caused the end of his life. We cry out in despair, “How long, O Lord? How long?”

The Prophet Isaiah called humankind to task: “O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” And from a mount somewhere in the region of Galilee, Jesus offered us mortals guidelines on how to survive in this troubled world and become better people.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This mortal life is going to get us down, get under our skin, and rob us of our happiness, but we

should not despair. God is faithful and just. Just like delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, justice and goodness will prevail in this world. Often it will seem like the forces and powers of evil and darkness have the upper hand and are winning. The martyrs whom we venerate lost their lives at the hands of earthly rulers and wicked men, and received a heavenly reward. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Even if we are caused to mourn, God is always there to give us hope and comfort. We mustn’t give up, because God’s kingdom will ultimately prevail.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Violence, robbing our fellow human beings of their dignity, lording power over others isn’t the answer; those endeavors will lead only to a bad end. Real power that endures lies in love, respect, empathy, and compassion.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Centuries before Jesus preached on a hilltop, Isaiah told his people that God requires us always to strive to be righteous, to live out God’s commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, and very essence, and to love our neighbor as ourself. When we do that, we will enjoy a more fulfilling life—certainly a less stressful one. Have you ever held a grudge, stayed at odds with someone in your life? Stuff like that makes us anxious; it keeps us on edge; it raises our blood pressure. Ask your doctor about the negative effects that stress and high blood pressure can have on your health. Jesus gave us much more effective medicine than a prescription drug. And if we don’t forgive and show mercy, we’ll just wallow in our stress, anxiety, and desperation. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” When we show mercy and love, it helps us in the end, and often when we’re known to be “that guy” who always shows mercy, others will do the same for us.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Why should we bother harboring evil intentions in our hearts? Why should we go around without forgiving those who do us wrong? Why should we try to pay back evil for evil? And we say or think things like: “I’m not gonna give so and so anything or have anything to do with them, because they haven’t done a thing for me!” “I’m not gonna help that person, because they’re not doing anything to help themselves.” We can’t find a way in this country to guarantee health coverage for everyone, because we don’t want our tax dollars supporting those who don’t help themselves. Why do we think and do these things? God always knows what’s in our hearts. If we keep our hearts pure, saturated with love, and rich in mercy, we will see God moving in our lives and in the world. Give all your adversities over to God, and let him handle it.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” The saints did it. Jesus told us that hatred and violence are never the answer. Folks like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. changed entire nations and inspired this entire planet by showing how this is done. Why can’t we do it? Because we’re afraid of meeting the same end as they and other martyrs of history. But Jesus’s powerful words remind

us that there is always a greater reward in this world or the next: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Finally, Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” There are many folks who don’t want peace. There are many who want to hold onto their power by keeping others down, disabling them, and keeping them undereducated or unable to vote. When we Christians denounce discrimination, racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia, gender-identity phobia, intolerance of any kind, either by our words or our actions, the haters are going to come out. They’re going to say all kinds of things about us on social media. They may even scream in our faces. They may even try to silence us. They did it to the prophets and they did it to Jesus. But Jesus said, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.” In other words, there are many times in this mortal life when God’s intention for humanity’s moving forward gets sabotaged by human error and those errors become way bigger than our human frailty can fix, so let’s trust God to handle it in his divine wisdom, with his unmatched power, according to his timeline.

So, how do the Beatitudes fall on your ears? How do Jesus’s words resonate with you and inspire you to be a better person? Will you take his words seriously so you can live a happier life with less stress and anxiety? Or are you going to let the darkness of the world and other people put out your light? The Beatitudes should encourage us to keep on keeping on, each be the best, most loving person we can be, and let God be God to take care of the rest.

Hopefully, as the Church, we can be here for each other through life’s ups and downs; we can inspire each other to be better and do better; the beauty of what goes on in here can lift our minds, hearts, and souls toward the holiness of God; so that we can rest assured that in the end, everything’s going to be all right. Chill out! God’s got this. God’s got us. And, God’s got the whole world and the whole universe in his hands. Amen.

Resource

Feasting on the Word for Epiphany 4 (Year A, Volume 1).

<https://covenant.livingchurch.org/2018/01/11/why-we-need-the-saints/>