

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

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I can't help but imagine that Jesus' disciples and followers must have frequently been in a state of awe, and confusion, after listening to him preach and teach. His teachings were not only intriguing and insightful, they were also so often opposite and contrary to how the world thinks and acts. They were challenging teachings intended to guide his hearers down a path of conversion not traveled by the disciples of this world. Jesus asked his followers to see life through God's eyes and not through those of the world, and in so doing, he was asking his disciples to turn their lives upside down and inside out. This is the hope of today's gospel reading, the Beatitudes, where Jesus challenges his disciples to have a different worldview as he describes those that are truly blessed by God.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus shared his surprising insights into who it is that God's blessings rest upon. The disciples must have been shocked at the recipients of God's blessings as Jesus taught them because it was not how things looked around them. But it also must have been a message of comfort and hope for those that had been rejected by the world's standards. This message that God does not judge, or bless by worldly standards should not have been new to the disciples; after all, it was the same message that God had been proclaiming since bringing his chosen people out of slavery in Egypt, and right through the prophets, such as Zephaniah six centuries before Jesus. Zephaniah proclaimed to the Israelites that there would be a remnant from the land of Judah, survivors that would be spared after God's judgment upon the land. But it would not be a remnant based on wealth or power or those that are esteemed by the world, rather, it would be the humble and lowly of the earth that would find God's favor and protection. This message brought comfort to the powerless, who recognizing their inability to control their situations, put their trust in God. This humble, lowly remnant would not only survive, they would thrive through their faithfulness to the God of the covenant.

St. Paul, understanding the importance of our dependence on following God's way, and not the world's, encouraged the Corinthians to not boast in themselves and what they could do in their own power, but to recognize their powerlessness and boast only in the Lord. To emphasize our powerlessness, St Paul tells us that *God chooses the foolish to shame the wise and the weak to shame the strong. God chooses those that count for nothing in this world to reduce to nothing those who are something.*

This idea that it is the humble and lowly, and the foolish and weak, that are blessed by God is so contrary and opposite to what the world tells us is important and worthy of honor. The advertisers that are paying \$90,000 a second for their television commercials during the Super Bowl this weekend are counting on us feeling anything but humble and weak, and when was the last time you heard a parent encourage their child to grow up and make nothing of themselves. Yet in the Beatitudes, Jesus underscores that the world's ways are not God's ways. In God's eyes, it is not the powerful that will inherit the land, but rather the meek, those that are powerless that will remain. It is not the rich, those that have the means to exert power, but the poor in spirit and the persecuted who are powerless in their situations that will gain the kingdom of heaven. It is not those fighting for freedom through power and might, but the peacemakers, those that overcome evil with good, that will be called his children. When Jesus spoke these words to his disciples, they must have been very comforting to a powerless people that were impoverished, mistreated, abused, and ridiculed for their faith by a powerful and cruel occupying force. But Jesus did not intend for the beatitudes to just be words of comfort, they also were also meant to be words of challenge and conversion. In the Beatitudes, Jesus challenged his disciples to not respond to their situation through worldly power such as force, corruption, collusion and extortion, but rather, to a conversion of heart, to be merciful, to mourn and to rejoice trusting that God would bring them to a place of mercy and comfort.

For us here and now, the Beatitudes are probably more of a challenge than a comfort. After all, we are living in the richest country in the world, where

our wealth and consumerism can easily build a facade of power, protection and isolation that masks our deep spiritual poverty. We live in what can arguably be called the most powerful nation that the planet has ever witnessed, and we have often attempted to bring about peace through military supremacy and weaponry rather than using our influence to promote justice and dignity for all persons.

The Beatitudes are words so familiar to us, that they have risked losing their “shock value,” their power to turn our lives upside down and inside out, but they can be just as transforming in our lives today as they were to the disciples when Jesus first spoke them. Today, we are still being called to radical discipleship, and the Beatitudes can be our stepping stones to a conversion of heart. We are called to look honestly into our minds and hearts to discover how we manage the goods of this world. Do we hoard them and use them as leverage and power? Or do we use them for the common good, benefiting humanity and glorifying God?

Lent will begin in just a few days, and with it the opportunity for a season of penance, self-sacrifice and conversion. Might I suggest that this Lent we learn the lessons of poverty and humility by not just giving up the easy things like chocolate, coffee or meat, but that we also give up the things that keep our lives from being radically transformed; our attachments to power, prestige and the deceitful notion that we have to live our lives by the standards and examples that the world has to offer. Taking St. Paul’s advice to put aside the worldly allures for what would appear as foolishness. In light of the Beatitudes, how else shall we live our lives other than with humility, poverty and complete dependence upon God?