

Epiphany 4A 2023

Today we hear the beatitudes, a kind of preamble to Jesus' sermon on the mount.

Though it is familiar, it is also frequently misunderstood.

As is often the case, the misconception stems in part from the translation.

Because in English "bless" is a verb, when we hear "blessed are," we imagine an agent who grants a blessing to a recipient.

We think, in other words, of God granting a favor to someone as a reward for admirable behavior.

The actual Greek word used in this pericope (remember the word pericope that means a section of the Bible?) . . .

the Greek word used in this pericope is an adjective, one that we have encountered before.

It is μακάριος, which means something like "joyful" or even "enviable," which might be a more helpful translation in this instance.

A clearer rendering therefore would be, "The pure in heart are enviable because they will see God."

It is the purity of the heart itself that leads them to see God, in other words, and not that God *chooses* to reward them for being pure of heart.

This helps to make sense of why Jesus would say that someone is “blessed” who is poor in spirit, who mourns, who is meek.

It is not that God wants us to be miserable, that God is a sadist.

Jesus is saying that those who have adapted well to an unhealthy culture—people like Herod or Pontius Pilate—are not to be envied.

Those who are satisfied with the way things are have no use for a relationship with God or us.

We are simply a means to an end for them, not someone with whom they walk and grow and learn, someone who shares challenges and joys, insecurities and successes.

It is those who feel out of step, who are frustrated, who refuse to adapt to a world in which people who treat others as mere instruments are envied.

They eschew using others as tools, which includes not just traditional forms of political oppression, but cutting remarks, condescension, gossip—things we do at others expense to make ourselves feel powerful.

Using others as tools would be a perfectly reasonable attitude if this life on earth were all there is, but if there is more, if there is a purpose to our existence that extends beyond this life, then those who are longing for something more, those who are not satisfied with the ways of the earth are those who are enviable.

The longing in our hearts, our discomfort, is a longing for God.

It keeps us open to learning, open to relationship, which is what God wants from all of us.

Jesus is not the first Jewish teacher to encourage relationship.

Prior to Jesus, the prophets urged people to develop their connection with God, but they did not all listen.

Micah writes poignantly that God has a controversy with God's people.

God speaks to them, as a parent speaks to a son or daughter.

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!”

Imagine!

God, the almighty creator, is humble enough and cares enough to be honest with us, to admit God's frustration and pain, and to seek to process these feelings with us.

“Answer me!”

Micah asks, what does God want of us?

Did God create us as instruments for God's ego, to build God up with flattery and gifts?

No.

Although the people want to sacrifice and be done with it, to give a calf and then lead their lives however they please, God wants a meaningful relationship and addresses them through prophets to call them back.

Amos explains that God wants us to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God.”

In other words, God wants us to engage with God in all things good and bad, to keep processing together with God.

Notice that it does not say that God wants us never to make mistakes.

It is not that God approves of failures, but, when acknowledged, failure can help us to move forward, to grow in relationship with God.

Sometimes sin sparks growth.

We should not forget that King David and Moses were both murderers.

Again, it is not that God approves of murder, but, when we do fail, we are to keep working on our relationship with God.

John Newton, writer of “Amazing Grace,” was a slave trader who had a change of heart and became an Anglican priest.

His sin spurred his growth.

When our child lies to us, we disapprove, but ideally we use it as an opportunity to encourage growth, to work toward a stronger relationship—process, not perfection.

In any relationship, the point is to keep working, listening, learning, growing.

Relationships thrive when two or more people commit together to work on it, not when two people think of themselves as blameless.

In fact, the working on it *is* the relationship.

If we place the expectation of perfection on our shoulders, we will live in constant disappointment with ourselves and others.

A person who tries hard to be perfect is, moreover, not really relating to us, or to God, but to some self-constructed, ego-driven ideal.

We want a friend who processes with us rather than a friend who practices perfection in front of us as her audience.

Christ's sermon turns the way of the world upside down.

People who do not see beyond the world think that those who are beautiful, strong, powerful, and wealthy are enviable.

When we think there is nothing meaningful beyond this earthly existence, why not be as comfortable as possible?

If we ask ourselves the more profound question, however, what is the point of existence, or even, is there a point of existence, we come up with a different understanding.

If we see the world as a classroom where we learn integrity, honor, compassion, love, then we will wish to spend our time here differently.

When we start living out of that purpose in relationship with others, we become more joyful, more fulfilled, more alive, and *experience* that we were correct in thinking there was more going on than random atoms.

We start to connect hearts, and realize that it is better to share a difficult path together than to be alone on an easy one.

At that point, we become enviable.

Those who care, those who long for God are blessed.

They are free to work things out as they arise rather than being trapped into maintaining an image, a status, a façade.

They are enviable, μακάριος.

What seems like failure to the world is success, and what seems like success is failure.

The experience of walking the path together will demonstrate this to us.

Walking together is a gift we offer to one another.

It is a gift that, in its very nature, begs to be offered, that longs to be given to the whole world around us, a world that is in desperate need.

This is the mission of the church.