

Sermon – Epiphany 4 – January 29, 2017 – Cathedral of the Incarnation

Matthew 5:1-12

When you come to live in a new country it takes a while to find your place in the culture. Over time you become transformed by it, which enables you to be more fully engaged in the community. You have to allow this to happen if you want to broaden your experience of your new home. For some new immigrants it can be daunting and a fearful transformation and so it can be resisted. I arrived here from a western culture that was becoming more heavily influenced by US culture but was still quite different. My integration and transformation has been rather steady.

One of the tests for me about how I am assimilating has been my ability to understand US football, a misnamed sport because the ball hardly ever touches the foot. My earliest memory is that it was called Gridiron in Australia because we have four different types of football all of which require the ball to be kicked with the foot frequently. I could never understand why 60 minutes of playing time actually took three hours to play and why so many players? I've over time become awed by the plays that within the space of a second or two snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. So after nearly 6 years I have finally come to understand enough of the rules and strategy to allow me to thoroughly enjoy the game. Although as a Jets fan my joy is intermittent!

It is difficult to really fully embrace anything, let alone come to enjoy it, if we don't understand the rules.

The same can be said about our lives of faith. To really understand our faith and our spirituality, and to live more fully in to it, we need to understand the rules first and then how to live a life informed by those rules and commandments. This is one reason why family and church school are so important for young people because it is there that they hopefully come to understand the basis of our faith in God through Jesus Christ. An adult that feels God's call in their life, but who has no grounding in Christianity, might find the transition more difficult. This is why adult formation classes and spiritual retreats and groups are important for us. By deepening our understanding of faith we are more open to living a fuller Christian experience.

In this Epiphany season our gospel readings come from Matthew's account of Jesus life. Matthew's account is most closely aligned with the Jewish culture that he and the new disciples of Jesus were grounded in. Many commentators proffer that Matthew saw Jesus as the new Moses and his account of Jesus' life contains five major discourses, which seem to follow the pattern of the five books of Torah.

Today's gospel reading from Matthew Chapter 5 introduces the first discourse that will be unfolding over the next few weeks. The beatitudes, as these verses have become known, set out nine types of people that Jesus says are favored by God. The readings paired for today span almost a millennia of time but contain in their kernel the essence of

the same message. That message is that what God desires for us is to more fully understand a way of being in our relationship with God and within our community.

As Moses went up Mt Sinai to receive the original commandments God promised, here we have Jesus going up a mountain with his disciples to teach them some important new insights. As I mentioned earlier Jesus and his disciples were Jewish and were steeped in the Law and Jewish customs. Jesus made it clear, and you will hear this next week, that he did not come to overturn the law or the prophets rather to fulfill the law and the prophet's testimony.

It is important to bear this in mind because what Jesus says during his time with the disciples is for them not to try and overturn the law, or ignore it, but rather to fill out the Law and help the disciples see the possibilities of a fuller way of being that can lead to a fuller life.

The beatitudes can at first appear to be rather daunting. We might have asked, do we really have to be meek to inherit the earth or pure in heart to see God, or for that matter be persecuted to get into heaven? Some people have interpreted the beatitudes that way. Some have said that these are the ideal standards for God's people that can never be achieved thus revealing to us our need for grace from God.

I'm more inclined to agree with the scholars who interpret these sayings as not ethical imperatives but rather eschatological blessings, or blessings that will lead us more fully into the kingdom of God. The intent of Jesus therefore is to encourage his disciples to see the poor, the meek, those who mourn and hunger for righteousness for they are blessed in God's kingdom. The merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers are also blessed. The Law could be interpreted harshly and corruption in the religious communities was rife. So Jesus specifically points to the poor and the meek as if to remind his disciples not to overlook these people.

Matthew's community faced many pressures not unlike our faith communities of today. We are, like they were, faced with the question of how to live a life of faith in a system that is trying to instill fear and uncertainty. Uncertainty and fear causes stress and anxiousness that are powerful emotions that often overwhelm us. Jesus is encouraging his disciples to see a new way of being in the world centered on simplicity, hopefulness and compassion.

If the disciples can embrace this way of being then it will help them faithfully endure their lives living under occupation and within a corrupted society. It will help them to endure in the Law but with a heart for justice. If we take as an example the second beatitude – Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. We tend to associate mourning with grief and death. We mourn the death of a loved one. In this instance though we could imagine Jesus connecting, and wanting the disciples to connect, with those in the community that mourn the corruption and injustice they live with.

If the disciples are able to see and connect with those who mourn the issues within their communities then they are more able to connect with them and to offer them hope to enable them to endure their suffering.

This is what we aim to do in our communities as well if we are open to each other. We see those that suffer, those that need a helping hand and we provide word of comfort to those that need building up and those that hunger to know Jesus at a deeper level. This is the work of the church as the body of Christ. We are called together unified by our faith in Jesus who offers us a deeper understanding of God's will that allows us into a deeper way of being. This message has been the same for centuries.

The ancient prophet Micah, writing in the 8th century before Christ, brings to life God's deep disquiet with his people who had been paying way to much attention to their cultic practices and not enough attention to an ethical obedience that faith requires. In essence they were talking the talk and not walking the walk. Talk is cheap we might say.

God desires justice that is measured by how well the vulnerable in our community fare – the poor, the mournful, the meek. Micah calls people to remember God's covenant with Abraham and the people that is the basis of God's intended relationship with his creation. He is calling them back into a deeper relationship with God through the transformative power of justice and love embodied in each of us, and how we live our lives. Justice is a transformative virtue that seeks to establish or restore community and aims to balance personal good with common good.

Micah reminds his community that God seeks only that we do justice, and we do this today by being the voice and body of Christ, to love kindness, which we give to others by seeing them as the blessed of God and to walk humbly with God, by spending time in prayer and silence so as to hear God and by listening to others, learning from others and sharing with others the love and justice of God.

Today more than at anytime that I can remember we are being challenged as people of faith to be the leaven in the bread and the light to the world. We can feel consumed by the political discourse and beaten down by it. It's troubling for many. Jesus though, and Micah, remind us of the essence of our faith and ask us as members of the community of faith to look out for each other and to see each other and those outside our community as the blessed of God.