

Sermon – Feb 3, 2008 – Beatitudes – Epiphany 4

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²²“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. ²⁴“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. ²⁶“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Matthew 5:1-12

⁵When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Here we are in the 6th Sunday after the Epiphany. What does our Lord reveal about himself this week? Well, we have the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Plain.

But first, have you ever heard the Parable of the Pit? It starts like this:

A man fell into a pit and could not get himself out.

An OBJECTIVE person happened along and said, "It's logical that someone would fall, down there."

A SUBJECTIVE person saw him and said, "I feel for you down there."

A NEWS REPORTER asked...

"Can I have the exclusive story on your fall into the pit?"

A SCIENTIST saw him and said..."I'll calculate the pressure necessary (pounds/square inch) to get you out of the pit.

A GEOLOGICST said..."Just appreciate the rock strata in your pit."

A GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL asked..."Are you paying taxes on your pit?"

The LAND USE INSPECTOR asked, "Did you have a permit to dig a pit?"

An OPTIMITST said, "Things could be worse."

A PESSIMIST said, "Things WILL get worse!"

But JESUS, seeing the man...reached down and lifted him out of the pit.

This parable or story shows us the kind of love our Lord has for us. It is a love that finds us when we are in the darkness of the pit. This love reaches down and scoops us up, rescuing us from our various pits, whatever they may be...it's a love that restores us to solid ground. Jesus' love has no personal agenda as did all the others who stopped at the pit in the parable.

Jesus' agenda is simply one of healing us from our suffering and restoring us to wholeness.

Today's Gospel is also about our relationship to God. Did you know that the Beatitudes appear twice in the Bible? First there's a version in Matthew, in the 'Sermon on the Mount'. Then there's a different version in Luke, called the 'Sermon on the Plain'. That's the one we've heard this morning.

As well as his disciples, there is also a great crowd of people gathered. There are people from Galilee, from the north in Judea and Jerusalem. Jesus' fame has spread. From far and wide they have come to be healed from their diseases and pains. Those with troublesome spirits, epileptics and the paralysed. They had heard that he healed them all.

Everyone was trying to touch him. Would you be one of them? Reaching out to let his sleeve brush against your skin for a moment? I know I would be. I'd be reaching out for a touch from Jesus. I would want to feel the power which was coming out of him, and healing **all** of them. Not just one or two were healed...but **all** of them were made whole.

Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place. Then he looked up at his disciples and began: Blessed are you who are poor.

Notice he speaks to his disciples. The sermon was not for the crowd, but for the disciples. They are 'in Christ' and are special, they are followers. And here Christ is revealing to them what His love is all about.

'Blessed' means **Favoured by God**. So Jesus is saying that specially favoured by God are those who are poor, hungry, sad and persecuted. He is saying also that they will be delivered from their pain and unhappiness.

We know from this sermon and from the rest of Jesus' ministry, that God favours us when we are 'down and out' in any way. This tells us something of the love of God. It is a love that is present in our suffering; in fact it is a love that acknowledges the reality of suffering. It is a love that does not require us to smile and be happy all the time. It is a love that does not require us to come first at the finish line. It is a love from whom no secrets are hid.

Rabbi Levi Yitshak of Berdichev in the Ukraine, used to say that he discovered the meaning of love from a drunken peasant.

The rabbi was visiting the owner of a tavern in the Polish countryside. As he walked in, he saw two peasants at a table. Both were gloriously in their cups. Arms around each other, they were protesting how much each loved the other.

Suddenly Ivan said to Peter; "Peter, tell me, what hurts **me**?"

Bleary-eyed, Peter looked at Ivan: "How do I know what hurts you?"

Ivan's answer was swift: "If you don't know what hurts me, how can you say you love me?"

God **does** know what hurts you and me. God knows also what's hurting the world. Jesus tells us that God specially favours those who hurt. And Jesus calls us, his followers, to that same sensitivity, that same love and that same favour for those who are down and hurting. Jesus calls us, as his disciples, to be like him and to stretch down into the pit and to pull others out. He is saying that maybe our lives will be tough. And if we should suffer because of going out of our way to be there for others, then we have the promise that every thing we could possibly need will be provided...when it matters. Ivan in the Polish tavern, wanted his friend to know what hurt him. So do all those around us. Here is a headline that caught my eye:

Cross-country champ waits for last-place skier before celebrating gold medal win

Almost 18 min after winning the Men's 15 km classic, Finland's Livo Niskanen waited until the final competitor crossed the line to celebrate his gold medal.

Niskanen topped the podium a whopping 23 seconds faster than the man, who finished in second.

However, it was Niskanen's Olympic spirit that captured the hearts of people across the globe, as the 30-year-old waited for Colombia's Carlos Andres Quintana to complete the race. Quintana finished last of the 95 skiers

Niskanen emphasized the need to respect all athletes because they have put blood, sweat and tears into qualifying for the Olympics. He also noted how some countries are not as financially privileged with their training as others.

"All athletes must respect each other," Niskanen said of his decision to wait for Quintana to finish the race. "Everyone has worked hard to be here.

Jesus calls us, as his disciples, to be like him and to stretch down into the pit and to pull others out .Let us pray:

Christ,we are all poor. We need you.

We have no life but your life.

When we hunger and thirst,
when they insult us and reject us, you are with us.
To be with you
is the "blessed" in "Blessed are the poor." Amen.

When we lived in McAdam, our youngest son Allen played on the Senior Boys' Basketball team. After years of mediocrity, the team made the semi-finals and went up to Miramichi City. They won their first game. They were then one game away from the thrill of playing the final at UNB's Aitken Centre in Fredericton. They hadn't done well as a team in years and years. Interest in them was high. McAdam had a great crowd of supporters who travelled to cheer on the team.

But then in the determining game, after leading by 15 points, the other team's score crept up. In the final few minutes of the game, the other team took the lead and won by only 2 points.

Our boys were devastated! And their pain was visible. But in the quiet milling after the game between the fans and the team, something **special** was going on. The boys and the fans were sharing their pain. There were tears, hugs and words of encouragement. In sharing the desolation of that moment, there was something profound happening.

I wondered as we drove home, whether the team had in fact been specially favoured by God in their defeat. Oh I'm not saying it wouldn't have been great to win. But the bonds formed in those moments of shared pain, were very special. I'll bet that that defeat will be as memorable in the minds of those boys as any victory.

There is no success like failure says the line of a song. In defeat, we are called to greatness. We are called to do something far more difficult than being victorious. We are called to get up again, dust ourselves off and carry on. We are called to rely on a power higher than ourselves, and a wisdom beyond our own...and in doing that, we are blessed, or favoured by God. Amen