

23 April, 2008

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This passage that we just heard in the reading of the gospel of Matthew, I must say, was never one of my favorites. I know a lot of people for whom this is their favorite reading in scripture, but whenever I hear it, or heard it, for a long time, I was always keenly aware of how I did not measure up. How I wasn't the kind of person that this gospel described. Hardly humble or pure in heart or a peacemaker – any of those things. Nor was my life such that I was blessed because I was persecuted.

And so I struggled and struggled with this gospel and I had been a priest for some years before I was given the opportunity to go to Israel, to the Holy Land. While I was there, I visited the Church of the Beatitudes. Now, many churches in Israel are so old and there's all this *stuff*. You know, lots of lanterns and lots of filigree and lots of icons and *stuff*. And various factions of Christians that fight about who gets to take care of the place, and it looks like nobody's taking care of it.

But there are some new churches, or *newer* churches. Each of those churches has the same architect who designs the church in terms of the scripture that it represents. So the church that's in the garden of Gethsemane has an altar that is on a stand that looks like a chalice and the windows are like these windows except they're all deep purple so that whatever time of day you go in there it is the nighttime.

One of this architect's churches is the Church of the Beatitudes. And it's up on a hill, where somebody mows the lawn and keeps it green and beautiful, just like you've always imagined it. Most of Israel or these places are not like we imagine it, but this particular little hill is. And the church, the church is an octagonal church with an altar in the center. [With] pews around in eight groups. Each side of the octagon is one sentence from the Beatitudes. I think they're even in English, but maybe not.

I walked into this church and it was open... it was like, it was like this church. It was clean – there were some adornments, but not a lot. And the light came in through a clerestory window, but the most amazing thing was a group of pilgrims who were sitting in the pews almost completely still, except they were singing (in some language that I didn't know) – the music was Fairest Lord Jesus.

I stood in that place and I was enveloped by the love of Jesus. From that day on, my sense of the Beatitudes, of this gospel that we heard today, is much more a sense of God's gift.

I know that that struggle exists for a lot of people. What does it mean to live into this challenge of these three chapters? We tend to focus on these twelve verses, but there's three whole chapters of this Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus invites into a life that is very different from any other life that we would live. It's a life that says:

Don't strive for all the things the world strives for. Strive only to be one with God. Strive only to know God in the meek and lowly. Know that God is present in mourning and in the sorrow. Strive to love your enemies. To love your enemies. Strive to see Christ in the least of these.

The gospel of Matthew was written by somebody who could easily have written the baptismal covenant that we reaffirm tonight. Matthew, on the one hand, says to us, "Here's how you live your life. You are meek and lowly and humble and loving your enemies and taking care of the poor and the hungry and the naked and the thirsty and you go visit those in prison." Matthew just constantly invited us into this life that says, 'We're gonna do things differently, and all the things we thought mattered don't matter at all.'

In preparing for this sermon, I read a story about a priest who was doing some premarital counseling. He was doing it with a bright, young couple – they had met, both of them, working for a bank. And they had everything. They had charm, they had grace, they were intelligent, they had good jobs, they had bright futures. The premarital counseling had gone fine for about three months and then the parents of the groom gave the couple (or gave their son) half a million dollars to buy a house in one of the nicest suburbs in town.

Well, it should have been a great gift. The only problem was that it came with a string. And the string that was attached was, the parents said, the house would always belong to the son and then revert back to his family. That she could never own the house.

You might imagine that things got a little testy at that point in the premarital counseling. These self-confident, very loving, very communicative people all of a sudden found themselves at odds with each other. The young priest said that they weren't really too inclined to agree that perhaps this gift came at too high a price. That perhaps what God was inviting them to do was to refuse the gift.

How often in our lives are we presented with the opportunity to go for success or the big time or to do things our way or for ourselves, when God is inviting us into something different?

There's a movement out there now called "Give it for Good". To take our tax rebate and give it for good. To say to our government that our economy is not about consumerism. That we as a nation believe that what's more important is serving the hungry and the poor. That's a huge challenge, because I've spent mine already. I knew what I wanted to do with my tax rebate! But what I noted was what happened to me when I read about that. I realized that there was a disappointment in me and a sadness in me and I didn't really want to do that. I said to myself, "Well, I'll tithe it." And then I said, "Well, maybe I'll give away half of it." But I thought, "What is God asking me to do here? What is my witness as a child of God? What does it mean to be blessed?"

There are other opportunities all the time. To stand and talk to the homeless person on the street, to actually engage in conversation. To meet and greet the person in your office who is difficult. To be an agent of transformation in a community that may be at odds with itself. But the deal is that Jesus is promising us – and this is the other side of Matthew – that it is only in living our lives this way that we will know what it means to be blessed.

Having it all is not having it all.

When you folks who are being confirmed or reaffirming your baptismal vows stand up here tonight, you're saying, "I'm taking up my cross. I'm following Jesus. I'm going on a different path than our culture invites us to go on to."

It was a striking horror to me to learn I can reduce my carbon footprint by remembering to turn my lights off and turn the heat down and taking shorter showers, but to learn that just buying stuff makes an impact on our earth. That the spiritual discipline that's out there before me now is to let go of buying stuff. That's heresy in our culture.

But think of the freedom! All of us are saying, "I have too much stuff." Think of the freedom that God is offering to us to have a life that we can pick up and take with us. To be peacemakers.

Think of how it is to sleep at night when you have been a peacemaker, rather than a person who took sides. Think of the interesting people we meet when we speak with the least of these. This is the law that Jesus wants to write upon our hearts. The temptation is to say that religion is a set of rules that we must abide by. And if we can keep all those rules then we can go to heaven. And what God is saying to us, "If you put my rule of life, this sense of love for all creation and all people, in your heart and live it, then you will know heaven on earth. You will participate in the kingdom of God. You will be blessed."

Now, if anyone still wants to come forward and be confirmed, you can do that!