

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany~January 29, 2023

Introduction to the themes of the day:

This week the Motion Picture Academy announced their nominations for the Oscar awards...The American football world prepares to anoint most valuable players. For whatever reason winners of the Super Bowl are called world champions, which is odd considering the teams are only in the US. The world loves its winners and super achievers. Yet in today's Gospel we hear Jesus declare God's blessing for all sorts of people we would call losers. Jesus words of blessing and his acts of blessing are the very heart of Matthew's Gospel.

We can spend some time asking ourselves whose view of the world is upside down; ours or God's.

Before we read today's Gospel....

We will approach today's Gospel reading in a very different way. Every year this preacher so wants to talk about each blessing Jesus voices in what we call the beatitudes. But that's a lot of detail to digest. Then it occurred to me...why not devote our midweek lenten series to these beatitudes? We can savour them and consider how they are at work in the world today. For now, picture a jewel nestled in its setting, with the beatitudes as the jewel and the rest of Matthew's Gospel as the setting for that jewel.

Today I will weave some comments into the Gospel reading, a change from our custom of having the sermon follow the Gospel.

We'll include extra material from Matthew that sets up Jesus' address to the down and out. Later, we'll see how Jesus' words of blessing permeate Matthew's story and shape our call to be Christ's hands and feet in the world.

People are drawn to Jesus because they see God's love in action.

GOSPEL: Matthew 4:23-25

23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. 24 So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. 25 And great

crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

Jesus' words describe what God has done and is doing:

Now Jesus speaks! People have experienced God's Good News. They have lived under imperial rule that regarded them as expendable. They had witnessed the empire's punishment of John the Baptizer for telling truth to the powerful. After the second service last week, a couple retold the story of how Herod's reckless promise and his wife's vendetta against John led to a murderous abuse of power. There could be no sharper contrast between the empire's petty ruthlessness and God's realm of justice and mercy.

Matthew 5.1-12

When 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.

Jesus also calls for a radical shift in both our way of viewing the world and our way of being.

There is an apparent contradiction coming....the fancy word is paradox. One side proclaims that God's blessing based not on virtue, but on God's special care for

the down and out, the tramped on, and the people who get ground up for doing good. The other side is that we're called act. Jesus' beatitudes are the lens we view the world through. That view shapes how we act. Remember Jesus saying "Repent for the realm of God is here"?

Everything that follows in the Matthew's Gospel springs from Jesus' blessing to the world's expendables and the "losers":

*When we hear the harsh sayings Jesus puts out—go back to the beatitudes.

*When we witness how a community navigates conflict—go back to the beatitudes.

*When Jesus makes good trouble and the religious authorities object-go back to the beatitudes.

*When the empire tries to stamp out Jesus and his ways of being-go back to the beatitudes!

After pronouncing blessings, Jesus identifies the crowds and his followers as salt for the earth and light for the world...and he summons them to be people who embody God's goodness. As you read the whole sermon Jesus preaches on that mountain, you'll see a lot of instruction about living in community and about our personal ethics. Jesus concludes a lengthy sermon with a story calls us to consider the meaning of our lives and what we build them upon:

Matthew 7:24-27

24"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!"