

BLESSED
Sermon for Epiphany 4A-Mt 5:1-12
LPC, 1/29/17

“Why does God hate me?” the young man going through a rough patch asked. This is not such an uncommon frame of reference – to assume that being fortunate implies God’s favor and that misfortune means God’s disfavor. Preachers of the so-called “prosperity Gospel” still pack people in: promising that if you pray this way and do such-and-so you will be rewarded, financially and every other way, beyond your wildest dreams.

If you doubt that primitive assumptions persist even in sophisticated circles, think of some of the things people say when misfortune strikes. “I’m a good person. Why is this happening to me?” When something terrible happens to someone nice we feel a sense of injustice.

We assume that smooth sailing is the norm, and that difficulties are aberrations. When things are rough, we say, “Let me just get past this and things will be back to normal.” Why should “normal” be smooth, when everyone has bumps, and the bumps happen all the time? Why don’t we assume that “normal” includes bumps in the road -- that bumps are a part of “normal” rather than an interruption from normal?

Surely the answer to this is our deep-seated belief that if we are good we will be blessed and avoid misfortune, that blessing is a sign that we are good, and that misfortune is a sign of God’s displeasure with us. I’m not saying this is rational. I’m just saying we all have a tendency to think this way, especially when we are under stress.

If this is true in the sophisticated twenty-first century, it was even more true in Jesus’ day. We have multiple examples in the Gospels of people asking Jesus about apparently good people who had been cursed with misfortune. We know that Jesus repeatedly found himself up against this kind of simplistic thinking. We also know that Jesus was at pains to explain that God is not like this, and that what human beings regard as misfortune is rarely God’s punishment.

This brings us to the Beatitudes, the “Blesseds,” that we heard this morning. As you probably know, this passage comes at the very beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, perhaps the most famous of all Jesus’ teaching.

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five major teaching sections in the Gospel of Matthew, and occurs at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Context indicates that Jesus has retreated up the mountain away from the crowds to teach his inner circle of disciples between tours of healing throughout the countryside. Five chapters from now Jesus will send the disciples out on their own to teach, but first he wants to tell them what they are to teach. They need to get the story straight before they go out to influence other people. In our Sunday readings, we will be in the Sermon on the Mount for the next three Sundays.

As an aside, let me explore for a minute what the Sermon on the Mount is doing in our Epiphany lectionary. Remember I said that Epiphany is about how Jesus is met and known to be the Son of God. We have seen several ways this Epiphany how Jesus is met and known to be the Son of God: through

direct revelation from God, through the introduction and actions of other people, and through discipleship. Here we meet Jesus and know him to be the Son of God through Jesus' teaching.

The Beatitudes are the introduction to Jesus' first sermon. And as preachers do, Jesus starts out with something that grabs the attention of his audience. He starts out by contradicting what they have always assumed to be true: that if we are good we will be blessed and avoid misfortune, that fortune is a sign we are good and that misfortune is a sign of God's displeasure.

Jesus starts out by describing four conditions that are commonly assumed to be unfortunate: humbleness, which is how we can understand "poverty of spirit"; bereavement; meekness; and oppression, which "hunger for righteousness" connotes. Jesus delivers a punch by declaring these unpleasant states as "blessed."

He goes on to list three traits that are rarely rewarded in this world: mercy, purity and peacemaking, and declares them also "blessed." He concludes by saying that the righteous who are persecuted are also "blessed." And it's clear that they are blessed not because they are righteous, but because they are suffering. In other words, Jesus does not say that they will be rewarded with blessing once they are past their suffering. What he says is that their suffering is somehow itself the blessing.

What the heck is so blessed about suffering? Is God a sadist? Far from it. This is a difficult concept that goes far beyond just looking for a silver lining. I will do my best to shed some light by making three points.

First, suffering is a blessing because it strips our illusions of self-sufficiency and makes us aware of our dependence upon God and upon other people.

Secondly, suffering is a blessing because being stripped of joy makes us aware of what joy is, and makes us humbly grateful for when we have joy through no virtue of our own.

Finally, suffering is a blessing because in suffering we are like God. I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Seitz for this startling idea. God suffers. God suffers when God's beloved children suffer, just like we suffer when our children suffer. Like us humans, God especially suffers when God's children bring suffering on ourselves or upon the innocent. We suffer most when we love most. God suffers most because God loves most. This is what Jesus' death on a cross will show us.

What are we to make of this? God certainly does not intend that we intentionally bring suffering on ourselves. But I think we are challenged, in Jesus' teaching of the Beatitudes, to look upon our sufferings as the very stuff of life, rather than interruptions to the way life should be. This means that we dwell in (not dwell *on*) our sufferings enough to find the wisdom they have to teach us, rather than try to get past them as soon as possible and never think of them again.

And here is the wisdom of suffering: that we are not self-sufficient, but dependent upon God and others; that we need the shadows to understand what light is; and that we are called to love no matter what the cost, as God does. These are hard lessons, not easily learnt without some sort of suffering.

Wherever you are today, whoever you are, whatever you are, you are blessed. What you have been given has some wisdom, some blessing, to be gleaned. You may not be able to see it today, but you are blessed.