

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany Year A

Becoming Peacemakers

[RCL] Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

Today we commemorate, and celebrate, the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. Last Sunday, we heard in the fourth chapter of Matthew that Jesus has gathered disciples and gone throughout Galilee teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing the sick. The Sermon on the Mount, which occurs early in Jesus' ministry, is the longest piece of teaching from Jesus recorded in the New Testament, and the first recorded teaching in Matthew's gospel.

Matthew sets the scene for us: Jesus sees the crowds that have gathered, then goes up the mountain, where he sits down and begins to teach his disciples. Perhaps Jesus preaches his homily in answer to the question from Psalm 15: Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? Who may abide upon your holy hill? The psalmist had answered, "Whoever leads a blameless life, and does what is right, who speaks truth from his heart."

Perhaps his homily includes the text from Micah: What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8). Certainly the subject is how to live an ethical life, a life worthy of the household of God. What is the nature of God's justice, kindness, and humility? What is the nature of God's kingdom? What constitutes a blameless, right, and truthful character, for the individual and the community?

So Jesus begins: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* Why the poor in spirit? That doesn't sound right to most of us. Wouldn't it be better to be rich in spirit? It is Jesus' role to help us re-think our definitions and values; his movement is one of renewal. Jesus helps us to look at the old texts from the prophets and the psalms in a new spirit. So let us look at blessedness as God's gift, as Jesus makes known the values and priorities of the household of God, and offers a guide to living God's gracious and abundant life.

To be poor in spirit is to be open and empty before God. Let us approach God's kingdom humbly, with our hands, hearts and minds open, free of clutter, of old habits and anxieties. Humble and receptive, available for God to do a new thing. Jesus re-orders our reality, re-defines the nature of abundance to mean a new life in God.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. The mourner is cracked open, available to receive God's grace. Open to sorrow over all pain, offense, and need. Mourning is another kind of emptying, an assumption of appropriate responsibility for the brokenness around us.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Qualities of gentleness, quietness, kindness, and

humility. Qualities of letting go of control into the hands of God. Another kind of emptying.

So the first step to kingdom living is emptying, and the next is transforming that clean emptiness to the blessing of a profound relationship with God. Poverty of spirit, mourning, gentleness, humility: these are characteristics of the contemplative life, these are qualities of a life of prayer.

Righteousness and justice lie at the heart of an active life in the kingdom of God. Having taught his faithful disciples how to be humble servants of God, Jesus begins to teach them to be leaders: peacemakers who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

In the section of the Beatitudes describing the righteous life, Jesus puts truth and justice issues on the table. Justice must be accompanied by mercy and purity of heart. The psalmist has written, in response to the question Who may abide on God's holy hill: Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right, who speaks the truth from his heart. There is no guile upon his tongue; he does no evil to his friend; he does not heap contempt upon his neighbor.

These words describe the Beatitude qualities of purity of heart and peacemaking. One who is pure of heart is single-minded in the quest for justice and truth, sincere, transparent and without guile before God. One who is pure of heart cultivates habits of integrity: unity among heart, word, and deed. The peacemaker values truth and reconciliation: peace with God, reconciliation in the community of faith, love for all neighbors, near and far. These are qualities of life in community.

Finally, *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake*. A great challenge to the qualities of blessedness – openness, gentleness, humility, purity of heart, justice, and mercy – occurs when we are persecuted for that very peacemaking to which we have been led by our relationship with God and our neighbors. Or perhaps we want to aid and protect those who are being persecuted. There is no peace without justice. Those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake must call on virtues of courage, patience, and self-control.

Peacemakers must affirm hope in the midst of difficulty, despair, suffering.

The shape of the Beatitudes is brilliant in presenting an ethic of character based on the interplay between being and doing. In the Beatitudes, we journey with the disciples of Jesus from faith through simplicity, service, and reconciliation to hope. Hope is the future tense of faith. As Christians, we live in expectation. Expectation leads to joy and freedom. Jesus reminds us: rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. As followers of Jesus, we are to be prophets, in our prayers and in our lives, of the good news of the kingdom of God.

Hear with the disciples, Jesus' words of renewal. We are blessed by God's grace to live the abundant life of the household of God, in relationship with God and our neighbors. We are called to be Peacemakers, living the Beatitudes in our daily work, in our communities and organizations. Do Justice. Love Kindness. Walk Humbly with your God. Hunger and thirst for Righteousness. Make

peace with purity of heart. Expect nothing less than the kingdom of God, and persevere in the face of opposition.

In Matthew 5:13-14, Jesus tells us what we will become when we live by the ethics of being he teaches in the Beatitudes. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. As the salt of the earth, may our way of being foster justice and peace in our daily relationships. As the light of the world, may our way of being be a model for justice and peace in the world around us and in the world to come.

We have need of Peacemakers here and now, at home, in our communities, in our country, in our world. May we become poor in spirit so that we may be renewed, refreshed, and inspired by the words of the Beatitudes. May we profess the good news of the household of God, in our lives and by our prayers. Amen.

Written by Susan Butterworth. Butterworth is a Master of Divinity candidate at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her area of special competency is Anglican, Global, Ecumenical and Interfaith Studies. She is currently an intern with the Lutheran Episcopal Ministry at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she leads weekly Taizé prayer. She is writing a book on the anti-apartheid work of the Anglican dean of Johannesburg Cathedral, Gonville French-Beytagh.

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