

**Twice Blest
Cooke's-Portsmouth**

January 29, 2017

Matthew 5:1-12

Jesus ascended a mountain sat down and began to speak. And his words would have astonished his listeners as being the polar opposite of the perceived norm. It is not the poor, the sad, the meek, or the hungry that are ever judged as blest. Indeed the poor in spirit are to be pitied, and the sad often dismissed because we are expected to count our blessings even in the wake of calamity and loss. The meek hardly have a voice and are not always acknowledged or taken seriously- if they can be discerned above the din. And the hungry would be hard pressed to see blessing in an empty belly that cries out for sustenance. Anyone who has experienced persecution is not going to view it as blessedness. And I don't think anyone ever wants to be hated! When we are being lied about, and our good names sullied by innuendo and slander we do not rejoice and give God thanks, even if it does give us solidarity with the prophets. But Jesus looks out over the crowd who has gathered and tells them just that; teaches that poverty, grief, timidity, and want are blessings.

Though living under Roman occupation where the imperial world gives value to power, wealth and status, Jesus announces that God's favour is found among the powerless and the poor. It would have been refreshing and good news indeed to the downtrodden and the beleaguered. And implicit within the teaching is the hint that those who suffer will be twice blest. They are blessed in the midst of their hunger, poverty and persecution and they will be blest when the situation is reversed. The poor in spirit will be rewarded with the kingdom; the grieving will receive comfort; the meek will inherit, and those starving will be sated. We are blessed in the suffering

and we are blessed with the rewards of the kingdom when the suffering ends. We are twice blest by those very realities and challenges that beleaguer. Of course it is also usually the case that we are often blind at the time to the inherent blessing when we are dealing with hunger, grief, lack of righteousness and poverty. It is when we are sated, at peace and comfortable that we recognize the blessing in disguise.

It is often when the angel of death comes and takes up residence in the lives and homes of many before the grace and beauty of a single moment becomes poignant. After the diagnosis of terminal disease in our family I wanted to spend as much time as I could with the one whose days were numbered. We went out to lunch almost every day even though it was winter and parking was a challenge. After going to many of the familiar places more than once the one who had fewer days said, "Can't we just go home; we go out a lot." I realized that I had become so preoccupied with *doing* things with her that I was losing out on the opportunity of *being* with her. And maybe it is easier to be busy doing because then we can avoid uncomfortable silences when there is nothing to say. We don't have to talk about end of life wishes and funerals; the fear and faith associated with dying. But if we stop being busy and preoccupied we can be touched, inspired and overwhelmed by grace.

There is blessing in weeping for tears speak volumes when worlds fail. And there is something purging and cleansing about tears that may leave us physically spent so that we might sleep. Tears that can remove the blindness in our eyes that make us concentrate too much on suffering, death and fear and open our eyes to the blue of the sky; the warmth of a smile and even the anger

and disappointment in the one whose days are numbered and yet who has the God given right to feel the power of anger and a depth of lament.

Those who mourn know the value of a Nano- second of life in a more real way than others whose lives seem less limited and they encourage us to open our eyes and see the eternity in a moment.

Those who mourn know the value of a sacred memory even if it causes us to weep in recalling it. They recognize the gift inherent in a memory to keep people connected long after the final breath has been exhaled. Blessed indeed are those who mourn for they receive comfort. And can it not be stated of most of the things referenced in the Sermon on the Mount? That blessing is inherent if one has the eyes of faith to see and experience the power and presence of Grace?

Blessed are the merciful who inspire us with their compassion and insight that can be a contagion if we allow ourselves to be truly touched by its magnanimous power. Our daughter Sarah, a heterosexual woman, has taught me more about the injustices faced by the gay and transgendered community more than anyone else. And once our eyes have been opened we cannot be blind again. Her heart is so big and her passion for justice so great that I have been enlightened on the plight of women in patriarchal countries and culture. She has opened my eyes to the value of the person who begs on the street; many of whom she knows by name. And she never leaves work, home or gym without coin in her pocket to give to one who asks.

Blessed are the merciful- though they be mocked and teased for their compassion and because they have set themselves apart from their peers for they shall be the great purveyors of mercy

and they will teach others by their example just how little it takes to make a difference. In showing mercy and compassion they shall receive the respect and admiration of their parents, peers and recipients of their unbridled mercy and compassion.

As we scratch beneath the surface of the Beatitudes we can begin to discern that the teaching is more about practicality than impracticality. Despite living under the yoke of oppression, Roman domination, poverty and a class system that punished the widow and the orphan for the plight over which they had no control Jesus spoke a word of hope and dignity. The point of the sermon was to raise their eyes a little wider and to see themselves not as God forsaken but as loved by God; blest by God in every circumstance both now in the experiencing of poverty of spirit, meekness and hunger and again when rewarded with the kingdom; it is a call to hope over cynicism.

Jürgen Moltmann, distinguished theologian has written that the death knell of the church is when the overall attitude moves from anger to cynicism. Cynicism differs from anger. Cynicism has a type of apathetic acceptance to it: simply accept that this is the way of the world and you cannot change it. The Sermon on the Mountain invites us to ponder the opposite view which is rooted in hope. We place our hope in the one who offered hope to the hopeless. We are blest in the poverty, angst and grief and will be blest again when we receive comfort, mercy and peace. I know what a tall order this is to embrace.

At the 90th birthday of a sweet lady to which I was invited I had a conversation with a similar person of age who is not convinced that the ascension of Donald Trump to the Whitehouse is not

the first sign of Armageddon. I did not tune into The Inauguration but was well aware of the protests throughout North America. Aware as well about the discrepancy in the reported number of attendees and chuckled a little at the suggestion that there exists an “alternate set of facts” surrounding the same thing. My computer informs that the Doomsday Clock is poised to be set even closer to midnight which signals the encroaching possibility of the annihilation of the earth. And yet in this text we are being reminded that we are to see not as the world sees; to seek the blessing even in the wake of paranoia, conservatism and protectionism.

Jesus saw the crowds struggling under the weight of oppression and occupation. They came to him in hope for a word of sustenance that would enable them to carry on. Jesus looked out over the crowd and he said, “Blessed are those who humbly depend upon God’s grace, for to you belongs the kingdom.”

Blessed are those of you who struggle with sadness for you shall find comfort.

Blessed are you who are meek and quiet for your demeanour does not escape notice, or affirmation.

Blessed are those of you who demonstrate kindness and justice for you shall receive in kind.

Blessed are you who aspire and work for harmony, for you shall be called the sons and daughters of God.

Blessed are you even when you are gossiped and lied about because your innocence, tenacity and courage does not escape the eye of God.

I am not suggesting that we pay no attention to the troublesome realities that we are reminded of everyday in the news. Being created in the image of God is not a summons to naiveté or dismissiveness. It is a call to be fully aware in all things: aware of both the need for mercy and the inherent presence of mercy; the need for peace and the presence of the peace that passes understanding. Faith encourages us to embrace sadness as a gift from God and to avail ourselves of the truth and insight that come with loss and a broken heart. And faith attunes our senses to the life giving balm that comforts, sustains and heals the rifts I our hearts.

My beloved in the Lord I do not stand among you this morning and counsel that you take no notice of current events that give us all pause. I do stand among you and challenge us all to have faith, hope and courage in spite of the current events that give us all pause.

This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. May it empower us to live with justice, kindness and humility in our day. Amen.