

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
The 4th Sunday after The Epiphany
January 29, 2017

As Jesus stood looking out at the crowds before him on what we now call the Mountain of the Beatitudes, he would have seen many things, for one could say he was looking with three sets of eyes. One set would have noticed the outward appearance of the multitude of people. They would have seen the ages of the people, the family groups which were gathered, the clothes they wore, and the expressions on their faces. Another set of eyes would have delineated the group into social classes: the temple authorities, the fishermen, the women and children, those with wealth, those without, for I believe it was a mixed crowd that day. The final and most perceptive set of eyes would have looked into the souls of those gathered, seen the spiritual place each resided in their relationship to God and to the world, and discerned the spiritual truth of each person present. Jesus would have looked within their souls and in many would have found poverty of spirit, a hungering for a better life, a restless heart bound up in an unjust system. This is the spiritual truth Jesus addresses when he shares what we call the Beatitudes, his statements about God's blessedness meeting our deepest need.

As Jesus' followers, we too are to develop a third set of eyes that peer into each other's souls and offer rest to the weary, sanctuary to those with conflicted hearts, and safe refuge to those in danger, for this is what faith looks like. This is what the heart of our parish has always been turned toward. This is what we're working to develop in our young people, this triple vision, whereby they will move beyond simply noticing the outward appearance of others, as if discerning the various social groups in the cafeteria and judging people by who they eat their lunch with, but instead they will notice the state of others' souls, so that they may be agents of God's blessedness, and allow the flow of God within their hearts to meet the deepest needs of others.

When we speak of blessedness, we always acknowledge that blessedness comes from God. It is not something we initiate or can call into being. It is always freely and abundantly given by God. Blessedness is a force that moves everything there is toward something which is more whole, more fully reconciled, and more satisfied. Blessedness is the work of God moving us into the best of who we can be, moving our world into the best of who we can be: a community rooted in the desire for the peace and well-being of all people.

Our young people have done amazing and holy work this past year through their mini-mission events, which were focused on alleviating the hunger in our community. This coming year we will be addressing the needs of people who are displaced, either in a particular time in their lives or as a permanent situation. Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves and we are going to continue to practice this commandment. Our young people may not know this, but our youth mini-mission events are actually an opportunity for them to live into the baptismal vows that they made or others made on their behalf. In our baptismal covenant, we each promise to

seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. It's a challenge to live this out in our world these days, but this is what faith looks like. This is how God's blessedness enters into our world, through our actions and the caring of our hearts.

To comprehend the beatitudes, the statements of God's blessing coming into our world, it is really important to understand how Jesus' audience in the Gospel of Matthew would have heard these words. So, I'm going to explain each beatitude as I understand Jesus to have meant it, in the words which would have made sense to the people before him, and then I'm going to translate it into a reality our young people have had or will have this year, as they spread God's blessedness into the world to those in deepest need.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those to whom God gives courage when they are poor and beaten down by evil-doers and forces of injustice.

Blessed are the women and children who come with bruised bodies and hearts to a place of refuge, to open arms who will welcome them, to open hearts who will help them, to open minds who will teach them self-respect. Blessed are our young people who will build raised garden beds at the WIN shelter, so that young children and their mothers can joyfully watch tomatoes ripening in the summer sun, can taste the sweetness of a freshly picked strawberry, can feel the healing seep into their bones as they do the therapeutic work of tilling the soil, for they will find the Kingdom of Heaven through creation and the care of others.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are those who recognize how far the world is from the way God would like it to be. Blessed are those who are saddened at idolatry, injustice, exploitation, and violence in the world, for such mourning is the first step toward longing and living toward the realm of God. Blessed are our veterans who bear the cost of the lingering effects of violence on their lives, who long for a world where that need not happen to anyone else. Blessed are the veterans who mourn the life they thought they would have. Blessed are our young people who will listen to the stories of our veterans, who will care about their struggle of re-entry into our community, who will offer comfort to their hearts by the hope in their eyes of a different way of being in the world, one for which there is no need for violence.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

In Jesus' time, this literally meant blessed are the poor who have lost their land to the wealthy. They are blessed because they will have plenty of land in the realm of God.

Blessed are the refugees who have lost their land to the wealthy, those wealthy in weapons, those wealthy in destruction. Blessed are our young people who will sit with refugees, show photographs of their families or schools or communities they live in, and help them learn English, so they may find a new land in the welcoming realm of God.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Blessed are those who want all relationships to be right, the way God wants them to be. Blessed are we who will purchase new shoes or gift cards so the 40 homeless students attending Shippensburg schools can have properly fitting shoes. Blessed are the students who will feel better about themselves, as God would want them to, when they can run and play in sneakers that fit, when their shoes keep the rain out, when they have boots to trudge the snow in. Blessed are we who can help relationships be right by helping our children.

Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are those who share a covenantal love for someone, who know the love of God through their love of others, those especially dear to them.

Blessed are the families in the Ronald McDonald house who know, without a shadow of a doubt, the unfailing and everlasting love for their child who is being treated at Hershey Medical Center. Blessed are our young people who will cook for the families, filling the house with alluring smells of freshly baked muffins and chocolate chip cookies. Our young people will be agents of blessedness as they support families who are very aware of their deep love for someone who is ill.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are they who have an undivided heart, a will for only thing: the realm of God. Blessed is Jay Eury, the director of the gleaning project, which our young people participated in this fall. Blessed is he, for he focused on one thing: feeding the hungry in our area. Blessed are our young people who help others fit the pieces of their lives together by providing fresh produce for their meals.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God.

Blessed are the people who seek shalom, who seek the cessation of conflict, and who want the growth of a community in support for all things good. Blessed are those who press for change in the social conditions that point to peace.

Blessed are the people who come to our Christmas Day Dinner, where the community is caring, the food abundant, and the joy tangible. Blessed are our young people and all who serve at this meal, for they are offering a glimpse of what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like, where peace and goodness abides in community.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake and who are reviled on Jesus' account.

Blessed are those who recognize they are socially rejected by their community or even their family because of their witness to the values of the realm. Blessed are those who stand with others until those outside their circle or comfort zone find their own voices, assuming the risk of ridicule or rejection.

Blessed are those who stand up for the rights of others, the workers of the YWCA, who provide refuge to those lives who would not be missed by others, for the victims who find themselves trafficked and with lost souls.

Blessed will be our young people who provide assistance to those residing in the YWCA who have been traumatized by life and who will be willing to go into the uncomfortable places and be with people very much the “other”.

Each week, God’s blessedness flows into our lives through the Holy Eucharist, during which we sing,

“Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God of power and might,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.”

May we allow God to say, “Blessed are you”, for let us come in the name of the Lord, and through our actions and our care allow the flow of God’s mercy and love to meet the souls of those in deepest need.

Amen.