

*Sermon preached on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 29, 2017
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Fredonia, New York
by the Reverend Canon Jerre W. Feagin.*

Today we commemorate, and celebrate, the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. Last Sunday, we heard in the fourth chapter of Matthew's gospel that Jesus had gathered disciples and gone through 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 Mathew'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. Perhaps it is here where Jesus preaches his homily in answer to the question from Psalm 15, which we just recited together: "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, and who speaks truth from his heart."

Perhaps his homily includes the text from Micah: "What does the Lord require of you to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? 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. Wouldn't it be better to be rich in spirit? It is Jesus' role to help us rethink our definitions and values. 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 a gracious and abundant life.

To be poor in spirit is to be open and empty before God. We approach God 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 a godly life is emptying, and the next is transforming that clean emptiness to the blessing of a more profound relationship with God. Poverty of spirit, mourning, gentleness, humility: these are the characteristics of the contemplative life – these are the 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 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 the 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 of 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.

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 taught by Jesus and led by our relationship with God and our neighbors. 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 and suffering.

The shape of the Beatitudes is brilliant in presenting an ethic of character based on the interplay of being and doing. We journey with the disciples of Jesus from faith through simplicity, service and reconciliation to hope. Hope is the future tense of faith.

Jesus tells us what we will become when we live by the ethics he teaches in the Beatitudes. “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” As salt, we can foster justice and peace in our daily relationships. As light, we can model justice and peace in the world around us and in the world to come. We have a great need to become peacemakers today – at home, in our communities, in our country, in our world. May we become poor in spirit so that we can be renewed and inspired by the words of the Beatitudes. May we have the courage to profess and live the good news of Christ through our prayers and actions knowing that we are in good company.

Amen.