

BLESSED COMMUNITY

Epiphany 4, Year A: Micah 6:1-8
Psalm 15
Matthew 5:1-12

Rainey Gamble Dankel
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Trinity Church

Key Passages: *He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and 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)

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Matthew 5:6)

A friend in another city is a classical pianist. She performs regularly as a soloist and in the chamber ensemble she founded, in addition to teaching students of piano. She practices every day for hours. When she was in high school, a few years into her piano studies, she was recruited to be a cheerleader. She declined, saying that she needed to practice the piano. The next year she was asked again, and her response was the same. The impatient coach was incredulous. “Honey,” he said, “haven’t you gotten the hang of that thing yet?”

Last week we heard Jesus call the first of his disciples. They leave their fishing nets and an astonished father in the fishing boat, and follow this new teacher, this Rabbi who simply says, “Follow me.” Do they know what they are in for? Does the father think they might be back in a few days? We don’t know.

The very next chapters contain an extended teaching, known as the “Sermon on the Mount.” Today we read the first part, the familiar Beatitudes. Jesus withdraws from the crowds and takes his disciples to a mountain location, offering what one commentator has called his “inaugural address.”

The setting and imagery recall Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Matthew is locating Jesus in this prophetic tradition, not to replace Torah, but to enlarge it and incorporate it into his teaching about the “kingdom of heaven.” Just as the Ten Commandments form the basis of covenant life of a people with God, the Sermon on the Mount offers a vision of living as a community centered in relationship with God.

The words of the Beatitudes are much beloved. Often they are used in funerals as expressions of faithful living that center our thinking on how each of us responds to Jesus’ teachings. The promises of comfort for those who mourn, strength to peacemakers, and grace for those who live mercifully are balm to souls often overcome with grief and loss. And I do not argue with that

application of the Scriptures as helpful ways of thinking about our individual journeys as people of faith.

But close inspection and reflection also point us to the radical nature of these words for our life together. The blessedness of those who are meek, merciful, poor in spirit, and focused on God is not apparent in a world obsessed with power, success, violence, competition, and self-aggrandizement. The “impracticality” of Jesus’ words can lead us to try to “spiritualize” these words, relegating them to an interior world of idealized contemplation separate from the messy world in which we live. We think this is just about “heaven,” some afterlife in which we will all have golden harps. But creating this dichotomy robs us of the power of Christ to live into *this* world in which God’s love is being let loose.

Jesus’ words in the Beatitudes offer us images of an ideal world. The religious term for that is “eschatology,” a focus on the so-called “end times,” in which the world is transformed into the full expression of God’s purposes. The “kingdom of God” directs our attention to that ideal. For Jesus’ hearers, the focus would be both political, a time of liberation from the tyranny of Rome with its oppression of the poor, as well as spiritual, in overcoming the powers of sin and death to cripple human lives.

We are not there yet. But there is also an element of the “here and now” in Jesus’ words and life. “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” “The kingdom is within you.” The hope that Jesus offers is grounded in the present as we see elements of this ideal state being realized among us. The rule of love and mercy is the foundation of the communal life into which Jesus calls us. It is a vision that draws us into deeper relationship with God as a community having glimpses of the world as God wishes it to be. I like the phrase Martin Luther King helped make current: “the beloved community.”

The Beatitudes are not explicit imperatives or entrance requirements for the community. Jesus is not saying “Become poor in spirit” so you can be part of the community. Instead, he is promising that those who trust God’s power rather than their own merits will know the liberating and reliable love of God in the midst of today’s struggles. We experience blessing as a community as we learn to trust each other and live together with mercy and forgiveness. With God’s help, we become part of a beloved community.

“Blessing” is not a false face of happiness. It is not a denial of evil forces that eat away at our individual and communal lives. “Blessing” is an acknowledgement of God’s great love for us, a love that even death cannot overcome, and that demands our allegiance and our daily striving to be realized in our own lives and in the communities of which we are a part. Our most basic prayer is the heartfelt “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven.” We pray for the wisdom to see where God is at work and for the

courage to be part of that work. And we pray for comfort for ourselves and for all who are suffering under the powers of oppression and injustice. It is lifelong work.

Let's look at one Beatitude as an example. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." It is tempting to see this as primarily dealing with personal morality. And that aspect is important: God expects each of us to develop a conscience that sorts out right and wrong and develops habits of life based on integrity and truthfulness.

But it is important to understand that the term righteousness refers most often to *God's* righteousness, and thus places an emphasis on our right relationship with God. God's righteousness includes salvation, that is, release from sins through God's mercy and forgiveness. Our daily striving is to remain in relationship with God, the source of the mercy and forgiveness on which our lives depend. That is the source of our blessedness.

God's righteousness also includes God's justice. The righteousness of God is made real in human communities in which justice prevails, in which there is a fair distribution of the resources necessary for flourishing. The "hunger and thirst" in the text are both metaphorical and practical. Blessing is a promise to all who strive for relief of suffering, physical and spiritual. As one commentator puts it, "Among those who long for God to set things right are both those who themselves suffer hunger pangs and those who mourn over an inequitable distribution of goods and services that allows millions to starve on a planet capable of providing food sufficient for all," (Douglas A. R. Hare, **Interpretation, a Biblical Commentary on Matthew**, p. 40).

Today's first reading also reinforces the picture of a beloved community in which physical and spiritual needs come together. The prophet Micah pictures a courtroom scene in which the people of Israel are called to account with God. God's actions are recalled—how they were delivered from slavery and given a homeland. From these blessings, God has established a people to be a blessing to others. But they have become focused only on themselves. The corrective is a succinct understanding of God's expectations, phrased as a rhetorical question: "and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

God has saved us for a purpose, that we might be free to learn to live together in harmony with God and with each other. That we become a beloved community, with clear markers: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. That we become a "light to the Gentiles," that is, to all people, not just to those who are part of our own tribe. That we be a people who love God and neighbor.

What does God expect of us? Justice and kindness are relational concepts, they are practiced as part of communities, as we learn to live together in light of God's justice and God's loving-kindness. These are fierce and powerful terms, calling us to face the gap between our efforts and God's expectations. They are also the source of our humility—walking humbly with God in a way that acknowledges our failings and relies on God's mercy and forgiveness. This is the posture we assume when we pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” It is prayer for strength and for guidance. It is an honest assessment of our failures to be God's beloved community, and a willingness to look for signs of God's actions in calling us forward.

As part of the recent Inaugural service, several clergy offered prayers for President Trump and for the nation. Among them was the Rev. Dr. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference. In his prayer he quoted from the Beatitudes, saying that “God blesses those who are humble...those who hunger and thirst for justice...those who are merciful.” As we join in that prayer, I believe we hear God calling us to live as a beloved community. Humility, mercy, justice, peacemaking—ways in which God's love is made real in the world. Seeing where God wishes us to be, how God wishes for us to act, how God can shape and reshape our hearts—these are lifelong commitments, practiced in daily actions and reflections.

In these days of a new administration, the Inaugural prayer is real. We are to be alert, to look for ways to assure that God's blessings are enjoyed with justice and equity. To uphold our ancient traditions of care for the most vulnerable—widows and orphans, the poor, the dispossessed, and the stranger. These commands must be foremost in our hearts and minds. We don't have to look far to see the challenges for a nation that claims to live “under God.”

So what is God's call to us as a community, to you as members of this community, *today, right now*? Perhaps it is to come to the altar and pray for forgiveness and healing. Perhaps it is to read the newspaper with a compassionate heart. Perhaps it is to call a family member from whom you are estranged. Perhaps it is to come to this afternoon's Play of Daniel to experience a Biblical story about religious persecution. Perhaps it is to stand on Copley Square this afternoon with those who bear the brunt of cruel exclusions for refugees and immigrants.

Just this morning I heard an interview on National Public Radio with a classical musician, perhaps his name was Asmin. He is a native of Damascus and a 15-year resident of the United States. He is part of the Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble, which performs music from a variety of cultures, with the expressed intent of forming bridges among cultures. He is presently in Beirut and will be performing in Paris in about a week. He was planning to come home to his family in the US in-between performances. Now he doesn't now if his green card will be sufficient to permit that visit. The reporter asked him

how this chaotic situation affects his playing. His response was something like this, “For me, to perform music is an act of freedom. The rest is unknown.”

May God give us eyes to see where Christ’s healing is needed and where our call to be faithful will lead us. May God give us courage and strength to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.