

Well, this morning we have one of those readings which causes us to say, huh? Called the “beatitudes,” these statements of Jesus have played a very special role throughout Christian history but in spite of their importance, they do make a pretty puzzling text. “Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are hated.....” really? How blessed does that sound to you? To me it sounds like the most imperfect, pathetic, and suffering people are the ones who are blessed. It is sort of like the “last will be first” kind of statement. The losers are the winners. This certainly does not fit into our world’s reality very well.

Actually, the importance of the beatitudes is that they tell us something very important about the nature of God, something that we human beings usually completely misunderstand. God has not come into our world with the toughness of an all-powerful thug to sort everything and everyone out. As strange as it sounds, God has chosen the way of weakness. There is something fundamental about God that is better expressed in weakness than strength, and foolishness rather than wisdom, and poverty than riches. When we think about it, the story of the earthly life of Jesus is a story of human failure, of human foolishness, of human poverty. And yet that is the revelation of God’s nature and, therefore, our nature as well. But how does weakness and poverty work in a world based on power and strength and wealth?

The issue here is about our relationship with God. We have a tendency to want to be as good as we can to please God and receive his approval. Doesn’t it make sense that we ought to do *something* in order to receive love from another? So, we try as hard as we can to be good and to earn that love. The problem arises when we see our own efforts to be good and successful as the foundation for our relationship with God. This is precisely why Jesus and Paul spent so much time in denouncing the Pharisees.

In reality, the Pharisees were the priestly educated types who dedicated their lives to understanding and applying the law of Moses, beginning with the Ten Commandments. It is too easy for us to treat the Pharisees as an example of all that is the worst of humankind. In fact, they were probably the best men of their time, the most religious, the most devoted to following the will of God. They were the most eager to express their loyalty to God and obedience to his every word, the most determined to never compromise with the world around them. But, as Saint Paul came to see, they were exposed to a fatal flaw. This was a growing personal righteousness that could be seen and measured so that at a certain point they could say they had succeeded in deserving God’s approval.

How lovely it would be to stroll boldly into church and declare, like the Pharisees in one of Jesus’ parables, “I thank you God, I am doing splendidly. In fact, I am quite a bit better than those folks over there.” This is the problem with the Pharisees’ approach. It allows a person to be self-consciously righteous, to see ourselves as a bit more righteous than others, and to treat near perfection as something that we can achieve and possess on our own.

This is at least part of the point in Jesus saying that we must become like little children if we want to enter the Kingdom of God. The gospel presents a sharp contrast between the scenes with the little children and that familiar story Jesus tells of the rich man who wanted to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. The rich man apparently has everything, not only does he have great wealth, he’s evidently a thoroughly good man who’s kept all the commandments throughout his life. Jesus loves him as soon as he sees him, but when he is told that his wealth is actually in the way, he goes away sorrowful. As usual, the disciples are stunned. “Who then can be saved?” they ask. The rich man would seem to be the ideal candidate for the reward of eternal life, but maybe that’s the whole point. The message that our Lord is trying to get across is that however good and wonderful we are in worldly terms, it is impossible for us to enter the Kingdom of God based on merit and

success. When the disciples then ask who can be saved the only answer they get is, “it is impossible with men, but not with God.” Huh? What in the world does that mean?

The rich man wanted to do what he could do to get into God's favor, to inherit eternal life. He wanted to do whatever he could to earn God's approval. That seems to me to be a pretty common human desire, to do something to get right with Almighty God. This is tough for us. Jesus was saying that we must simply receive the Kingdom of God like little children. Little children are precisely those who have not accomplished or succeeded at anything. They are in sharp contrast to the rich and righteous man simply because there is no question of their being able to deserve anything but only receive it as a gift.

I think that one of our fundamental human problems is that we are not really very good at receiving gifts. Think about it. When someone gives us a gift, one of our immediate internal responses is to think of something to give back. We feel like we now “owe” something. We think that we ought to do *something* to deserve receiving a gift from someone. Not always, but there are times when we think we don't deserve a gift being offered.

The gift of the Gospel is when we can say back, “you are absolutely right, Lord. I have done nothing to deserve this gift, and that makes it all the more loving and miraculous that it is being offered.” Again, children can do this beautifully until they are taught not to. Jesus is trying to convince us that we simply need to be on our knees, smiles on our faces, open hands reaching out, and simply saying, “thank you, Lord.” That is precisely why we call the love of God for us expressed through Jesus as unconditional. We are so trained, and even brainwashed, about the importance of success and self-sufficiency and earning approval that it's difficult for us to be open to any message calling for weakness and humility and vulnerability.

The Beatitudes also teach us something about the second part of the Great Commandment, to “love our neighbor as ourselves.” When we accept ourselves, warts and all, as God does, we are also then better able to truly love others as we are called to do. We can love other people as we no longer expect perfection from them or from ourselves. We can love life, with all of its ups and downs, wins and losses, and be at peace within our souls.

For this reason, many of us are deeply moved by the truthful words having to do with our own weakness: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.” Those of us who get all caught up with where we fall on the sin scale compared with other people are unable to accept the message of the beatitudes. The point is not our wretchedness or imperfection, but God's love and mercy, and faithfulness. So, in the final analysis we are not OK, and that is perfectly OK. All we are asked to do is to say “thank you.” Amen