**4 Epiphany**

**January 29, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

Loren Meade is an Episcopal priest and the former President and founder of the Alban Institute of Washington, DC … an educational and consulting organization focused of congregations. Fr. Meade was invited to speak to the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church when it was struggling with the issue of how to include … of not to include … gays and lesbians in the life and leadership of the Church. He started his remarks with, “The world is divided into two kinds of people: the kind of people who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those that don’t.”

A decade ago this congregation was torn apart by those who divide the world into two kinds of people. Today, we gather as a community of faith committed to radical hospitality that sees the world as one. Our Core Values proclaim our welcome to all of God’s children in the many expressions of humanity and spirit. Our gospel reading this morning, the Beatitudes from the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, affirms God’s special favor and blessing upon those who are often the ones who are not welcomed in our society.

There is a Garrison Keillor story about a man who comes home on a Friday afternoon from a long week of work and tells his wife that they are going camping at the quarry outside of town. The wife had other plans and was less than enthusiastic about spending the night in the camper shell on the bed of their pickup truck, but after a heated argument she finally caved in and packed what she needed. They drove out to the quarry in angry silence and the husband parked the camper near the edge of the quarry and prepared to go to bed. But he had parked the camper on a slight hill and it was not level … and his wife complained. Annoyed at her whining he said, “If you want the camper level then go move it yourself!”

So she did. She got in the driver’s seat of the pickup, put it in gear, and drove it all the way home.

Now, unbeknownst to her, as she had pulled away from the quarry, her husband had tumbled out the back door of the camper, and since he was between taking off his clothes and putting on his pajamas when she put the truck in gear, he ended up in the dark, stark naked.

Befuddled, angry, and not knowing what to do, he headed for the only light he could see, coming from a house on a small hill about a half a mile away. It was the home of two elderly women who lived alone. He approached the house, trying to be as modest as a naked man can be, and he knocked on the door. The two elderly women looked out and were shocked. The older one said, “Oh my God. There is a naked man on our porch. We have to let him in and give him some clothes.” But the younger one looked at her sister in horror. “We can’t let him in.” she shouted, “He’s naked!”

Garrison Keillor ended the story by reflecting that this is the state of today’s church. “Half of the churches see the naked in the world and want to provide them shelter; the other half see the naked and want them clothed before they can come in.”

It seems to me that some may feel that it is entirely unorthodox to open the door to the naked … think of the scandal. But it also seems to me that if we were to take seriously what Jesus took seriously we would be on that porch out there shouting that we provide shelter for the naked of this world … and, as a matter of fact, that is exactly what we do.

We live in a diverse world. Many people embrace diversity and welcome the stranger no matter the label that is attached to them. Yet, there are still others who look around them and feel very uncomfortable unless everyone looks just like them. St. Cyprian’s has chosen to embrace radical hospitality. We know blessings … so we bless.

The reading from Matthew’s gospel this morning is what we have come to call the Beatitudes.

* *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
* *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*
* *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*
* *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*
* *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*
* *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*
* *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*
* *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
* *"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

Matthew is telling us that in Jesus’s eyes … and therefore in the eyes of God … those who know divine blessings are:

* *Those who are spiritually lost*
* *Those who are grieving*
* *Those who are humble*
* *Those who have a desire for justice and are compassionate*
* *Those who are honest and live with integrity*
* *Those who are willing to work and sacrifice for peace*
* *And for those who realize that there is a cost to living this kind of life and are willing to live it anyway.*

This Sermon on the Mount also appears in Luke’s gospel, only the sermon is preached on a plain. There are other differences also. For one, in Luke’s gospel Jesus is speaking directly to the people. And this word “blessed” can be either “bless-ed” in a passive voice, or “blest”… the passed tense of an active voice. I Luke’s gospel Jesus is speaking directly to the poor in an active voice … he is speaking directly to those who have suffered loss and are grieving in an active voice … directly to those who are hungry and those who are thirsty, even those who are persecuted. In Matthew’s gospel there is a subtle, yet profound shift. In Matthew’s gospel Jesus speaks not to the poor, but about the poor … not to the hungry, but about the hungry … not to those who are persecuted, but about the persecuted. And it is usually read in the passive voice … “bless-ed.” The shift is such that when we hear the Beatitudes read from Matthew’s gospel we get images of those who are poor, and images of those who have lost everything, and images of those who are hungry, and are thirsty. In so doing we can have sincere pity on their plight, and we may be moved by compassion to send our blessing … but it really is about the other … not us . We know blessings … so we bless. Yet, it puts it out there, in some other place, with some other people.

But what happens when we hear the Beatitudes and look inside ourselves for our own poverty … even poverty of spirit? Poverty of spirit in the doubts about our own worth, and the lack of trust we have of others’ intentions? Or, poverty of spirit in the doubts we experience along our faith journey? And what happens when we hear the word of Jesus saying that you, not another, but you are the one who is blessed even in that poverty? What happens when we know that the blessings Jesus is talking about are the same ones that we know in our own lives. We are blessed … so we can bless.

And what happens when we hear these ancient words and transform them into our present day experience and know in our own hearts the hunger we have to be “right,” and “in the right,” and seen as worthy in our own life … and yet we also hear that we are considered blessed by Jesus? What happens when you know injustice in your own life because others dismiss you because you are woman, or a person of color, or gay or lesbian, or you don’t make enough money, or you don’t have the right education, or your faith isn’t orthodox enough … and still you thirst for justice … and yet you hear that you are considered blessed by God? What happens when instead of thinking about someone else’s loss you feel deep in your heart the loss of love in a relationship, or security in your job, or even your own self-worth, and the grief from those losses border on depression … and yet you somehow know that you are indeed blessed … blessed by God? What happens when you hear these ancient words and know them to be true for you … and know that Jesus is saying that somewhere in all that pain and fear and desire is blessing.

We live in a world where more and more people are dividing the world into two kinds of people … us and them … and sometimes we are the “them” … we are considered by those who are the “us” … as “less than.” We can fall into the trap of arguing that we are the “us” and the others are the “they,” but then we then we begin dividing the world into two kinds of people.

The Beatitudes are more than just some nice words in our Bible. They are a pattern for our lives. We are blessed … so we can bless others. We live in a diverse world. Many of us embrace diversity and welcome the stranger no matter what the label that is attached to them. Yet, there are still others who look around them and feel very uncomfortable unless everyone looks just like them. St. Cyprian’s has chosen to embrace radical hospitality. We know blessings … so we bless.

Remember, you are a beloved and blessed child of God. Collectively we are a beloved and blessed community gathered in the name of God … and of God’s son Jesus. We are blessed … and we are a blessing.

Amen.