

**4 Epiphany
February 2, 2020**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.
Amen.**

Sermon by The Rev. Deena M. Galantowicz

In today's Gospel, that we just heard, the crowds gather around Jesus, and he presents them with a vision of reality that overturns every assumption they have... about human life and the society in which they live. His message has come to be known as "The Beatitudes" a word that means "the blessings." It is probably very familiar to most of us. His vision is very challenging, and it pushes beyond the usual limits of understanding. We may wonder, perhaps explore, but I don't think we can fully understand what it is Jesus is saying in these statements of Blessedness. They couldn't fully understand then. We can't now./// But, this is the Gospel appointed for this morning, and hopefully we will benefit from our focus.

It has been said that the word "GOD" does not explain or define anything. Think of it: *God*...the word doesn't explain or define anything. It merely names that which still remains utterly mysterious. And, in fact, I think that that is what is being presented in all of today's Scripture lessons. In each of today's readings, people are being asked to come to grips with something of a mystery.// So, I think that, for us, if we take today's readings as a cluster, they may help us to uncover a quality of mystery that challenges our thinking, but also moves us forward in getting to the heart of what Jesus is saying in this so-called Sermon on the Mount...the Beatitudes...the Blessed are they.

Let's look back to today's first reading where Micah is saying to his contemporaries... that the ritual sacrifice of objects outside oneself is simply not enough. That is not finally what the mystery at the heart of existence requires. Rather, Micah is testifying that What is wanted, what is required, is the sacrifice of the self....there it is again...the SELF. Overcoming ego needs. Getting past the Original or Primary sin of Pride.

For example: Micah says: "Rise, plead your case before the mountains"... He evokes the vastness of nature to set the stage for a transformative idea, a way of living, that is far larger than the people's assumptions. He further says, "The Lord has a controversy with his people." Because Micah is speaking to rather self-satisfied listeners, these words would surely bring them up short. But, he continues to name times when God has acted for his people: he calls it, "the saving acts of the Lord." And then he continues, "With what shall I come before the Lord?" And his listeners are expecting a call to even greater sacrifices. Instead, they hear words that ring down through the centuries into every heart and mind that encounters them. They hear:

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?

THIS is what the Lord requires of you: not what you think is enough, but rather THIS that the Lord requires of you: To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

Sometimes I wonder if we actually do know this; instinctively we know that what the Lord requires of us is “to do justice. To love kindness. To walk humbly with our God”... But, somehow we just gloss over it, because it is just asking too much. Surely what we offer instead is good enough!

Moving on to consider our Psalm...Today's psalm echoes this message from Micah. It tells us that, at the end of the day, it is right conduct in life, our actions, that matter, rather than merely right beliefs in the mind. It is LIVING rather than presumed understanding. It is ACTING on our realization of the needs of others. It is caring absolutely genuinely about the other, rather than about the self! The Psalm begins with the yearning question, "Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? Who may abide on your holy hill?"

Reading today's psalm puts me in mind of a favorite poem by a 16th Century poet, George Herbert, entitled simply "Love." It is a dialogue between our self as the guest, and our Lord as the host. It begins, "Love... bade me welcome,... yet, my soul drew back...guilty of dust and sin." //The dialog continues between the host and the guest/ between us and the Lord///, until the reluctant guest, that's us... is persuaded to accept Love's insistent invitation. The guest feels that he is not worthy. BUT in the eyes of Love, this is irrelevant. "You must sit down," says Love "and taste and see."

Well...here is the entire poem...

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, (observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,)
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked anything.
Yes - A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, YOU shall be he.
I the unkind, the ungrateful?
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?
Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says LOVE, who bore the blame?///
Oh Then...I *will* serve.
YOU must sit down, says LOVE, and taste and eat:
So ... I did sit and eat.

I hope that wasn't too shmaltzy for some.

The poem comes to mind because it is George Herbert's beautiful comment on the theme of this psalm. WE stand before God's HOLY HILL and WE feel that we can never be good enough and so we walk away thinking that we can never do all the things to be right with God. But, we long for God, and so metaphorically, we look back sadly at the Holy Hill as we leave, feeling unworthy. But, just maybe, just blessedly, as we do, we may see a figure coming down, beckoning to us, just as in George Herbert's poem, he says to us: "Love comes to beckon to us." Love bade me welcome!///// And we are accepted in this once seemingly unattainable high place on the Holy Hill,/// not for our own worth, but for the incomparable worth of Him... who is both our Companion and our Lord. Yes, Love bade me welcome!

I leave George Herbert's moving poem reluctantly, but now let's consider our Second Lesson and what Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. Remember, Paul established this community, and he deeply loves them. He writes to them in guidance, " God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world...so that no one might boast in the presence of God." Again, God's ways are not the world's ways. God's ways are not about ourselves first, but rather about what we can do to manifest God's Love for ALL. Yes, "Love bade me welcome".

Let's take another look at today's Gospel with the familiar Beatitudes. We need to remember that most likely there were very few people listening that day who really understood what they heard! To go even further, these words were not so much to be understood as to be ABSORBED by their total being...head, heart, mind, spirit, soul...whatever words we wish to use for the many aspects of our humanity. What Jesus says is universal. He takes our human portrait of life and repaints it in front of our eyes. To use another image, he shows us how we ourselves see life, then peels away the canvas we have painted and shows us the canvas of God that was always there. In our canvas, the meek do NOT inherit the earth. They are oppressed and disregarded. In our canvas, those who show mercy, frequently find themselves dismissed as weak. In our canvas, those who are poor in spirit are frequently regarded as ineffective. In our canvas, to be pure in heart is often interpreted as being naïve, unsophisticated.

I would hope that when the crowds dispersed that day, moving back to the harsh and minimal life along the lake shore, or to the little towns and villages nearby, some of them at least, would have realized that their picture of life had been challenged to a new vision of real life. And, perhaps so for us, as we say words like, "Thanks be to God." ///// For any of us, whenever, and wherever, and however it may happen, after being on that mountainside, or hearing that voice, or knowing that beckoning, there is a new realization; there is a new vision of what life is all about. There emerges a life more filled with reverence, thankfulness, and praise. We realize that the more we act Lovingly, the more Godly we are. And the more the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!!!

May it be that for each of us there may come moments when God's picture, God's canvas, shines through ours... and we can hear about a better way of life. That is what Jesus spoke of that day: THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. No wonder we pray: THY Kingdom come, on earth, as it is in Heaven.

AMEN