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AMDG

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany – February 17, 2019

Today's Gospel sounds familiar because it very closely resembles the Beatitudes from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. However, Luke's beatitudes are different than Matthew's. They come much later in the narrative. They take place on a level plain and not on a mountaintop. In Matthew, the calling of the twelve apostles comes after the sermon and in Luke just before. Matthew's Beatitudes have a more spiritual bent, and Luke's are more straightforward, including what follows, the woes – woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full, woe to you who are laughing, woe to you what all speak well of you. And, I could use this sermon to discuss the various reasons for the differences and how Matthew's Christology compare to Luke's Christology. This would be a very convenient diversion from this very inconvenient Gospel. The truths that are presented to us in today's Gospel and followed up next week with very uncomfortable commands from Jesus, form the very core of Jesus's teaching and describes for us the upside down logic of the spiritual life. They are awkward for us to discuss. Legislators don't quote the beatitudes in lofty speeches about society. And, you won't hear of religious activists picketing to have monuments of the Beatitudes placed on capital building malls. Clearly God's values are not ours. For the past several weeks we've reflected on how God's love is made manifest in the world, and with today's and next week's Gospels we're shown how we can best experience life with God. And, it all goes completely counter to what we would normally consider blessing. Jesus doesn't say, blessed are the rich and powerful, blessed are the safe and successful, or blessed are the rule-followers or the law-abiders. He focuses on an entirely different group - the poor, the hungry, the despised, the rejected - all those the world would consider losers. Plainly, God has a preference for the last, the least and the lost. Those the world considers losers are really the true winners. And, those the world considers winners are really the losers. Being rich, satisfied, happy, popular are obviously not the goals we should be striving for. While we know in the depths of our souls that the things of this world bring us only fleeting pleasure. Yet we continue to pursue. And, when

we make wealth and pleasure our goal, it does something to us that is quite ugly. Making earthly pleasure one's goal distorts us, warps us. Friday's Divine Office epistle reading from the Second Letter to Timothy put it very well, people who in the darkest stages of being focused on pleasure are, – "lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive...slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous...swollen with conceit." Yeah, that's pretty much the end result of making the world's goals, our goals. We have plenty of examples among the world's most successful, even among our leaders. It's what our entire world is built around. Accumulating wealth, getting the things we want, being popular.

But, what makes being poor, hungry, despised, and rejected so great? It's not the promise of heaven. It's more than that. The beatitudes aren't just promises of pie-in-the-sky when you die. The mixture of present tense, future tense, subjunctive, and conditional mood, point to a reality that is both now and in the future, "Yet but not yet." Jesus is not just saying these blessings are for heaven, they are also present here and now.

Fr. Eric Law, an Episcopal priest and theologian, talks about a Cycle of Gospel living, in which he tries to explain how the poor and rejected can be closer to the promises of the Gospel than those who have much. His basic premise is that the "least, the last, and the lost" are closer to God's blessings because they have the least to let go of. Unhindered by possessions, pleasures, preferences, and popularity, they are most open to receiving God's abundant love. Just like the great multitude in today's Gospel, troubled, in search of healing and had come to be near Jesus. Their desperation opened them to receive God's gifts.

Those of us who have the most to let go of have the farthest to go, spiritually. Saddled with success and possession, we have much to let go of. Satisfied and happy, what need is there of God? And, many of us might be able to attest to the fact that when we were at our lowest points in our lives, that's when we felt closest to God. I certainly can speak to several very painful times in my life when accessing God's love and mercy seemed only a prayer away. Getting on my knees was easy, because I was nearly there already. It was only when all my own resources had failed me that I realized that God's abundant resources had always been within me and all around me. But, during the many times of abundance with which my life has been blessed, often

connection with God has been a struggle, requiring discipline, patience, and acceptance of my own limitations.

I know this is all quite disturbing and should make us squirm a little in our seats and in our hearts. But, we mustn't go away feeling hopeless. Remember, the rich man who approached Jesus and asked what he needed to do to gain eternal life and Jesus told him to give all he had away to the poor. He went away dejected because he couldn't conceive of letting go of the one thing he trusted above God, his wealth. Jesus' comment later to the apostles was that receiving the Kingdom was impossible for human beings, but not for God. For God all things are possible. It is only through God that we are able to let go of the things that hold us back from perfect loving, it is only through God that we're able to grow in love, it is only through God that we can attain the life abundant that has been prepared for us from the beginning of time. And, it's in our weaknesses that God's blessings flow into our lives. It isn't through our wealth and success that God blesses us, but through our wounds, through our vulnerability. It's the mystery of the Cross.

Today's collect expresses this succinctly, "in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed." God knows we need him, and God knows our efforts. God knows we are prone to wander and stray, easily distracted, and quick our trust in the things of the world and our own wits and brawn rather than in God. But, God's mercy is wide, his love extravagant. God's arms are always open to help and to welcome. We just need to let go of our own self-reliance and keep trying.

Today I offer one of my favorite prayers by Thomas Merton, which beautifully captures, what I've been sharing today. – "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone." Amen

Collect

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments **we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord,** who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Thus says the Lord:

**Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.**

**They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.**

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.

They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;

in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse--
who can understand it?

I the Lord test the mind
and search the heart,

to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.

The Psalm
Psalm 1

Beatus vir qui non abiit

1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, *
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

2 Their delight is in the law of the Lord, *
and they meditate on his law day and night.

3 They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; *
everything they do shall prosper.

4 It is not so with the wicked; *
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.

5 Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes, *
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.

6 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, *
but the way of the wicked is doomed.

The New Testament
1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of
you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of
the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been

raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ--whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

The Gospel
Luke 6:17-26

Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”

"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

"Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors
did to the false prophets."