

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 30, 2011
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Scriptures: Micah 6:1-8, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed People

Here's a Jewish story that is probably pertinent to our gospel reading for the day. An old rabbi said to his student: "In olden days there were men who saw the face of God." Why don't they anymore? — the young student asked. "Because, nowadays no one stoops so low."

Who wants to be a lowly person? Who wants to be stooped down? Most of us spend a good part of our lives trying to pull ourselves up. We go to school, we get a career, we make money. Basically all the things we do are meant for our own realization. We want to walk tall in society. Usually for good reasons. Our desire is to make great contributions to the society in which we live, and in order to do that we need to become recognized, important people. And don't think that applies to our civil lives exclusively. A great deal of so called religious people fall into the same trap.

I'll give you an example. I've never been a great student, so I knew from the get go that seminary was going to be challenge for me. But I consoled myself thinking that in reality it couldn't be that bad because after all I was in the business of serving God. Certainly the standards in a religious school are different to those of a secular school, right? Well, what I discovered was that there was a lot of competition in those "sacrosanct" classrooms where those called to be servants of others were being prepared for their vocations. Many times — not all the time — it was about who could get the better grades, who was performing better, who would stand tall in front of the teacher. Classes were certainly difficult, but to have to go through that kind of me-against-you of mentality was more challenging than anything else.

And yet, that's not what the story of the rabbi seems to say. The story goes that those who stoop low are the ones who see the face of God. But who listens to old folktales. I'm sure that is just one of those make-you-feel-good kinds of story that does not necessarily apply to us. Or is it? What if the standard does not come from a made up story? What if Jesus is the one saying that only by laying low you can go up? Is that what the beatitudes are about?

This is one of those teaching passages that is so very difficult to understand. I mean, there is something very weird going on here. It all sounds very nice and everything to hear that if you mourn you'll be comforted. And it is very inspiring to believe that if you are persecuted for a just cause that you'll be rewarded. But really, who wants to go through that? Who wants to mourn and be meek? Who wants to be persecuted and be put to death? Said in a different way, who wants God's blessing if you have to go through all of that?

Maybe we are not understanding Jesus' words correctly. You see, what we sometimes seem to hear is that you have to do this in order to get that. Much of our civil life is based on that. In fact, much of our religious life is based on that as well. Isn't true that we think that if we act kindly and live righteously that God is going to bless us? Good things happen to good people is the general rule of thumb. But again, I don't think that's what the beatitudes are all about. These words of the "Sermon on the Mount" are not meant to be understood as a prescription for life, but as a description of life. They are not instructions on what to do to be blessed, but a narrative of those that have been blessed.

When the prophet Micah spoke about what God requires of us, he did not say that it was a trade of this for that. In any case, the problem was that the people had cheated God from what God expected of them in response. God got them out of Egypt, sent them Moses to lead them through the desert, fed them and quenched their thirst. What God required in return, "to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." That's it. Simple. Easy. No contracts, no obligations on the part of anyone, and certainly no rewards. Just a description of the lives of those that believe in God.

We all want to be blessed. We all want to be happy. We all want to receive comfort. And God promises those things. But not because we are seeking to be blessed and to receive rewards but because we have made a deliberate option to live accordingly. We have decided to live as people already blessed. The poor, and the hungry, and the persecuted receive blessings, but not because they chose to live in such a way, but because they have understood that beyond what they have or lack the love of God is already present in their lives. In the end, their reward is not because they lived righteously, but because Christ loved them and loved them to the very end.

Do you remember what we said last week about those in the church of Corinth? They were divided, they were following their individual leaders, they had forgotten who had called them in the first place. In a continuation to that same reading, Paul tells them where their focus and attention should be set: the cross of Christ. When they are able to understand that it is in that act where they find commonality, they'll understand that everything else is irrelevant. We are not looking to be blessed. We are already blessed and are therefore just living accordingly to that blessing we have already received. When we are able to understand that, when we are able to stop and meditate on what God has done for us, then we may be able to understand that even in the midst of our situation we have already been blessed by God. Amen.