Sermon Notes Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12
Presentation of Jesus in the Temple

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? Micah 6:6-8*

The Beatitudes are familiar to us, and it is helpful to reflect a moment on the Sermon on the Mount and where Matthew sets it in the narrative of the Gospel. Jesus has left the desert and John is in prison. He calls Peter, Andrew, James and John from their nets and begins to teach. His first acts are to be among the poor and the sick and to teach and to heal the people who come to him. Word gets out and "all the sick" are brought to Jesus and "he healed them". People "afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics and paralytics" have family and friends who bring them to a teacher who heals; big crowds gather. When Jesus calls his disciples and begins his teaching and healing ministry something happens. Why so much attention to the least able to work, or be productive, or able to be a contributor to the economy of the Empire? When Jesus calls his disciples to follow him up the mountain to teach "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God," Matthew wants us to see this moment with Jesus as the new Moses speaking to his disciples and the people who are vulnerable or hurting; it is not a message of a law, but a promise of God's abiding presence.

The message of hope becomes the assurance of abundant life in the Gospel. Jesus does not come first to religious elite, scribes and pharisees, or to the rich or powerful; he comes to the vulnerable. He calls them "blessed" or "honored". The translation of "happy" does not quite capture the sense of blessed. How can we imagine that being hungry is to be "fortunate"? To be "fortunate" or "honored" is the promise that God will be there, is there. The Sermon on the Mount is about God seeing us where we are, "poor in spirit," or mourning, or as peacemakers, and God's Love is and will be there. Again, it is a turning upside down of our expectations. These are not the values of the Empire where it is ok to make someone carry the burdens of a soldier because the soldier can make them, but the recognition of God's beloved. Empire and power allow the poor to be exploited and perhaps, for the first time, some of the healed feel seen. The prophet of God sees them—and apparently sees not just the Jews, but the gentiles who have traveled to see him in hopes of being healed.

"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. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

The First Nation Bible translates the passage as "*Creator's blessing rests on the poor, the ones with broken spirits. The good road from above is theirs to walk. Creator's blessing rests on the ones who walk a trail of tears, for he will wipe the tears from their eyes and comfort them. The Creator's blessing rests on the ones who walk softly and in a humble manner. The earth, land, and sky will welcome them and will always be their home. (Matthew 3-5)* The translation is helpful to me because blessed be the poor in spirit is also an assurance that there is another way life on the good road will be different. Those who mourn will know the power of God's presence and comfort. The Beatitudes are not a prescription for best behavior to get something, but an awareness that "the Creator" walks with us. There is not a reward for being a peacemaker, rather it acknowledges that already the peacemaker is part of the household of God or walking the good road.

The way of the world might say—fortunate are those who work hard and have abundance or blessed are those with more than enough for they are demonstrating a good life. Jesus is instead suggesting we look with new understanding at the people around us, bring healing and justice, and know that God is also with the poor and the vulnerable.

In this lectionary, the Old Testament reading from Micah is chosen, reminding us it is not outrageously difficult to be in relationship to God. No special sacrifices or offerings to God are necessary. Be in relationship with others and God— *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? Micah 6:6-8* To love kindness is to see the other as family, as an attitude of being present to all people. As Christians we believe that through the power of the Spirt we try to walk the way of Jesus, forgiving, being forgiven and healing along the way.

On February 2 the Church celebrates the Presentation of Jesus at the temple in the Gospel of Luke, when Mary and Joseph bring the baby Jesus, offering two doves as an offering (one of the reasons we know that Mary and Joseph were poor). It is especially appropriate to acknowledge this on Sunday because we will have a baptism and gather for Annual Meeting. The text acknowledges the tradition that Mary and Joseph bring the child to the temple after 40 days and at the temple Jesus is recognized by prophets, Simeon and Anna, as the Messiah, the One coming into to the world to bring light to all the world. Traditionally candles are blessed at this time in a service called Candlemass because Jesus is recognized as the Light of the world. At baptism we give a candle because we too receive the Light of Christ and are witnesses to Christ in the world.

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God,…At that moment she (Anna) came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke2:28,38)

It is extraordinary that these first witnesses are elders, people who have been faithful and pray at the temple, looking for signs of God's promise. When we baptize a child, we are inviting us all to pray for a child as God's own beloved who is and will show the Light of Christ in their lives. Simeon and Anna speak to Mary and Joseph and acknowledge this child is a gift to the world. A people baptized, we all are being sent forth to be a Light in the world, not alone, but with the power of all those who go before us, who pray with us now, and who will grow in the strength and wisdom of the Love of God in Christ. May we recognize the Light in all of God's children.

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