

“A Sainthood We Are All Called To Pursue”

Matthew 5:1–12

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I have shared the following reflection on today’s Gospel lesson with some of you before.

Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathering them around him, he taught them saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are they that mourn.

Blessed are the merciful.

Blessed are they that thirst for justice.

Blessed are you when persecuted.

Blessed are you when you suffer.

Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven.

Then Simon Peter said, ‘Are we supposed to know this?’

And Andrew said, ‘Do we have to write this down?’

And James said, ‘Will we have a test on this?’

And Philip said, ‘I don’t have any paper.’

And Bartholomew said, ‘Do we have to turn this in?’

And John said, ‘The other disciples didn’t have to learn this.’

And Matthew said, ‘May I go to the bathroom?’

And Judas said, ‘What does this have to do with real life?’

Then one of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus’ lesson plan and inquired of Jesus, ‘Where is your anticipatory set and your objectives in the cognitive domain?’

And Jesus wept.

I share this reflection today because it points in a lighthearted way to the church's response to Jesus' teachings, especially those found in the Sermon on the Mount. We say we hold them in high esteem, but in everyday life, we consider them impractical. In his book *The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for Its Meaning*, C. Bauman says the church has been embarrassed by this material. The Catholic church says it is a counsel of perfection that can be taken seriously by monks and saints but is beyond the scope of ordinary Christians. Protestants explain away these teachings, insisting Jesus didn't mean what he said.

It's a bit like the way we view the term "saint." In Baptist churches, thinking of formally recognized saints, we say we don't have them, but we most certainly do. In the old days some of us remember, we had Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong. In this church, we have Fannie Heck and Sallie Balley Jones, Mary Lilly Gaddy and Ed Vick, Elmo Scoggin and Randall Lolley, and the list goes on and on. If saints are a higher level of Christian, somewhere beyond us, we have them.

But even in the ordinary sense of the term "saint," literally, one called apart by God for a purpose, we shy away from the term. "I am no saint," we say, or even of people we held in high regard, we say, "She was no saint..." As the Sermon on the Mount is beyond us, sainthood is only for a chosen few.

But all of this is based on a misunderstanding of sainthood and a trivializing of Jesus' teachings. All of us are called to a purpose by God, all are intended for sainthood in the most basic sense. And when it comes to Jesus' teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount, while we may not need to take it all literally, Jesus intends that we take it seriously, "we" as in all of us. The basic meaning here applies to us all.

Jesus is offering guidance on the nature of a genuinely saintly life. We may not achieve perfection, but this is our goal. The entire Sermon on the Mount offers such teaching, but these beginning words we have read, The Beatitudes, provide plenty of food for thought for one day.

One thing Jesus says about this genuinely saintly life is that it begins with a poverty of spirit or meekness, humility, not arrogance. Two beatitudes point in this direction. Blessed, happy, or fortunate are

the poor in spirit, he says, and blessed are the meek. It not only goes against the cultural norm; it is unlike much of what we experience from those who proclaim most boldly that they are Christians.

We encounter arrogance everywhere, people who are certain that they are right about whatever they are expressing an opinion on, even if they know absolutely nothing about it. It is one of the most irritating human qualities, the combination of ignorance and arrogance. People who are genuinely well-informed tend to be more reserved in their expressions because they know enough to realize they don't know it all.

But religious arrogance is even more off-putting, like the person Dana knows who told a mutual friend she is going to Hell because she is Jewish. That kind of theological nonsense is more than uninformed. It is arrogant and presumptuous, and it goes against Jesus' own counsel found later in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged (Matthew 7:1)." Blessed are the meek, says Jesus.

He also says that the genuinely saintly life is shaped by a relentless pursuit of righteousness. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, Jesus says. Another beatitude, blessed are the pure in heart, is related. "Purity" may seem to imply perfection, but what it is really about is a singular focus. Soren Kierkegaard's devotional classic *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing* gets at this reality. Purity of Heart is about focusing all we have on a pursuit of one thing — the good and right — which is what righteousness is.

It's helpful to note this because the term "righteousness" has fallen on hard times. We speak of self-righteousness as a negative thing, and rarely speak of righteousness in a positive way. But it's really just about doing what is good, right, and just in God's eyes. It's about living with a sense of conscience, an awareness of right and wrong, which cannot be assumed in this time, if it ever could have been.

But it's also helpful to underscore the fact that Jesus speaks of *pursuing* righteousness, *hungering* and *thirsting* for it with all our being, which does not mean we will always achieve it. All of us say and do things we should not. There is an old Calvin and Hobbes cartoon in which the question is asked, "Do you believe in original sin?" The answer is, "No, I just think we're all quick studies."

We are, so the key is that we feel bad when we transgress. That is having a sense of conscience. That is hungering and thirsting for what is right. In his book *Thoughts in Solitude*, after describing his imperfect way of seeking the Divine will, Thomas Merton says he believes that the desire to please God pleases God. This is what Jesus means when he says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

Jesus says the genuinely saintly life begins with meekness and pursues righteousness, and then he says it is about mercy. Blessed are the merciful. A mentor of mine said that Jesus brought grace and truth, but he was the only one who brought them in perfect balance. And thus, we need to lean toward grace, toward mercy, because our inclination, he said, is to be for grace and truth — grace for me and truth for you.

But it doesn’t work that way. Jesus says, blessed are the merciful, for they are the ones who will receive mercy. What we give is what we receive. He even tells parables to illustrate this point, that we are called to extend grace to others, make allowances, withhold judgment. Doing so is blessed and it is prerequisite to peacemaking which Jesus also says is blessed. As long as we hold grudges, there can be no peace.

This applies to personal and international conflict. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will never end as long as each party is trying to get even. At some point, there will have to be a willingness to quit keeping score and extend grace. Personal conflicts require the same move. We may feel like what someone else has done is unforgiveable, but we have all done the unforgiveable. That’s why the cross is the central symbol of our faith. Blessed are the merciful, Jesus says.

He goes on to talk about the blessedness of mourning and being persecuted and many other things in the larger Sermon on the Mount, but it’s all about pursuing a distinctive way of life modelled after his, pursuing it, not perfecting it. We may still not like the term “saint.” Perhaps we like 1 John’s term “God’s children” better. That’s fine because it’s about being like Jesus too, which is what sainthood is — being like him in our meekness, in our relentless pursuit of what is right, in our willingness to extend mercy to others. What might the world be like if more people were willing to pursue such a life?