

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time “Jesus Leads Us Up a Mountain”

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Have you ever had a mountain top experience? When was that time? What was going on? I think we all feel like we spend most of our lives in the valleys of life, going from point “a” to point “b” or in circles as the case may be, however, we all have at least one or two mountain top experiences when God gives us a glimpse of the world around us, where we receive clarity about God’s will for us and direction on where we need to be going in life. We call this Gospel reading from Matthew the Beatitudes. We find the word beautiful in the word beatitude because the beatitudes are Jesus’ recipe for how to live a beautiful life. However, I love how the Gospel reading begins with Jesus situating himself on a mountain to give his famous sermon. If you visit the location of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, you will discover that it is actually only a good sized hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. There is a lovely church on top and a nice trail that leads you down a grassy slope to the shore below. However, Matthew’s exaggeration that this sermon was given on a mountain is important. You see, mountains are places where you cannot climb higher. It is the place where the earth touches heaven. It is from that place where Jesus teaches his followers the spirit and perfection of the Law of Moses rather than the letter. You see, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is the new Moses. Just as Moses received the law from God on a mountain, Jesus is going to give us the perfection of the law from a mountain. Instead of a long list of “thou shalt nots” Jesus is going to give us a long list of “thou shalt”. And by doing this, Jesus is inviting us to have a mountain top look at what is truly important in life.

What I find fascinating is that, when you consider that the word for “blessed” in Greek is *makarios*, the Beatitudes can take on a very interesting new meaning. You see, *makarios* can perhaps be better translated more as the happiness we associate with the sense of being “fortunate” or even “lucky” than how we typically understand the word “blessed”. This more literal translation can provide us much food for thought as we contemplate what Jesus is trying to tell us today. It is as if Jesus is saying “lucky are the poor in spirit”, “lucky” are you when you are mourning, and “lucky” are you when you are insulted and persecuted. And the incongruity here that I think Jesus was effectively achieving in the original Greek is the question that we immediately raise in our minds with regard to all of this. How can anyone who is poor be considered lucky? How can anyone who is mourning be considered “lucky”? We can understand the value of being meek, hungry for righteousness or becoming peacemakers, but how can anyone who is feeling insulted or persecuted be considered “lucky”?

Let’s begin with those who are poor in spirit. How are they lucky? Those who are poor in spirit are people who are not attached to worldly wants or needs. These people are not swept away in needing to buy this that or the other thing. These people understand that just about everything we can buy will eventually turn to dust, so why buy it? These are people whose only wealth is a relationship with God and so they live simple lives. Ironically, these people also typically have larger savings accounts than most people because they don’t feel the need to spend it. Their wealth is fidelity to God and so the Kingdom of God is theirs. Get it?

How about those who are mourning? How are they lucky? Firstly, Jesus came to destroy death forever and welcome us into the eternal life of heaven. However, on a more basic level, those who mourn are lucky because they at least know what it means to love another. Do you understand what I mean by this? Imagine going through life without loving another enough to mourn them. I think many of us can get caught into the trap of closing our hearts to others because we want to avoid the pain of loss. Jesus is inviting us to open our hearts again to others. Those who mourn are lucky because they have opened their hearts in love of another. By doing this, they can know God better than others because God is love. And if they are united with Jesus, those who mourn are given the hope of being reunited with their loved ones in heaven and so they will be comforted.

How about those who are insulted and persecuted for the sake of the Gospel? Again, Jesus promises his disciples eternal life where there will be no persecution, however, in my experience the most difficult people to help awaken a sense for God inside of them are those whose lives are too comfortable with no challenges. It isn't until we experience some hardship that we truly start figuring out who we are, what we are about, and to sincerely start considering how dependent we are on God. Understand? They are lucky also in the sense that their lives are based on the mission of the Gospel and the goal of eternal life rather than being preoccupied on things of this world that do not have the power to ultimately save us. And so, lucky are you who are insulted and persecuted for the sake of the Gospel because your life is now directed towards something that actually matters rather than egotistic pursuits that ultimately at the end of time turn to dust.

And so, my friends, Jesus has led us by the hand up a mountain today so to give us a fresh look at where we are at in our lives, where we should be going, what is important and what isn't. He is inviting us to embrace the value of being poor in spirit, to embrace a simpler way of living, where our wealth isn't measured by the things we accumulate but rather on our fidelity to God. Jesus is inviting us to embrace the value of mourning which reflects our hearts' willingness to love the people around us with a deeper sincerity. Jesus is inviting us to embrace the value of being persecuted for the Good News of the Gospel so that we recognize clearly that our lives are not about us and nothing else in this world has the power to save us other than God. Once we have embraced these values, we can then better appreciate what it means to be meek in the eyes of God, to hunger for righteousness, and the value of being merciful to others and becoming peacemakers in our world that is so desperate for it.

Let's listen again to what Jesus promises if we reorient our lives to the beatitudes. Jesus says, "Theirs is the kingdom of God", "They will be comforted", "They will inherit the land", "They will be satisfied", "They will be shown mercy", "They will see God", "They will be called children of God", Jesus says, "Theirs is the kingdom of God", and "Your reward will be great in heaven." We all want this right? This is why beatitudes are Jesus' recipe on how to live a beautiful life. Jesus gives a new glimpse today of what this looks like from a mountain top perspective. He gives us direction today on where our path should lead from here. It is the narrow one that leads to heaven.