

4th Sunday of Ordinary Time “A Mountaintop Experience”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Have you ever had a mountaintop 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 at times. However, we hopefully all have had at least one or two mountaintop 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. It 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 from our perspective here in the Northwest, it is just a little 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, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is meant to be a mountaintop experience for those seeking God’s wisdom, like we had on Mount Sinai or on Mount Tabor. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is the new Moses, so to speak. 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 mountaintop 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 also be translated as “fortunate” or even “lucky”. 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. I think the incongruity here is intentional. 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 “lucky”?

Let’s begin with those who are poor in spirit. Why are they lucky? They are lucky because they are not attached to worldly wants or needs. These people are not swept away in needing to buy this or that. 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. On the contrary, as they get older, they find themselves wondering about who or what to give it all to. I am surrounded by wonderful people like that when I go to Catholic fundraisers like the Fulcrum dinner last week in Seattle that supports Catholic schools or our own school auction. For those who are poor in spirit, their wealth is their love of God and neighbor. And so, the Kingdom of God is theirs no matter how big or small their pocketbook is. 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 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. Followers of Jesus who mourn also carry with them the gift of hope in the resurrection. They are therefore comforted. See how this works?

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 significant hardship in life, like being insulted or persecuted, that we truly start finding out who we are, what we are about, and what is most important to us. We can also discover in these moments how dependent we are on God. This is no small thing. However, they are lucky most of all because their lives are focused on the mission of the Gospel and the salvation of the world rather than egotistic self-concern. They are therefore lucky in the sense that their persecution comes from doing something right and good for the world rather than something that doesn't matter at all. 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 or otherwise evil pursuits.

Yes, 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, 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 stuff 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 being persecuted for the Gospel so that our love extends outward into the world with the heart of Jesus who desires to save all. Once we have embraced these beatitudes, we can then better appreciate the values of being meek in the eyes of God, to hunger for righteousness, of being merciful to others and to be peacemakers in our world that is so desperate for it. My friends, the beatitudes give us a spiritual mountaintop perspective and a recipe for eternal joy. If we put Jesus' wisdom into practice, we are lucky and blessed indeed.