

The Rev. R. Justice Schunior
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 29, 2017
Matthew 5:1-12

Blessing & Being Blessed

To be honest, I've never much cared for the Gospel of Matthew. That's why we have four of them, right? So we can pick favorites. I prefer Luke's attention to social justice and the needs of the poor, or John's mysticism, or even Mark's immediacy and urgency. And we'll get a lot of Matthew this year. I know, I know that people love the Beatitudes; People love the Sermon on the Mount. They are beloved words. But I prefer Luke's shorter and more pointed sermon on the plain. Not "blessed are the poor in spirit" in Luke's gospel; instead, just blessed are the poor. Period. No euphemisms.

But Matthew's gospel has captured my attention during this time in our national life. We miss it a little bit at Christmas because we blend Matthew and Luke together to tell the Nativity story, but Matthew's additions to the early life of Jesus are seeming poignant to me. The Wise Men from the east who follow the star. Neither Jew nor Gentile they seek out Jesus because they know that his message includes them, despite their foreignness.

In 2013 I went on the pilgrimage to Israel and Palestine with the group from St. Mark's. In the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem there was a mural depicting the magi. Our guide told us that Persian conquerors had come through the area but never destroyed the church because they saw the mural and knew that story had something to do with them.

Later in Matthew, Herod tries to kill the baby Jesus and so orders a massacre of all infants. Joseph, Mary, and the baby flee to Egypt. The author of Matthew is trying to set up Jesus as a new Moses hence these vivid details that echo the beginnings of Moses' life. But to

me they more accurately echo current affairs – families on the run, seeking refuge and children are most at risk. One of the twelve days of Christmas honors all those babies massacred by a frightened tyrant. Once again, these stories seem more poignant to me this year, this year with families in the holy land, once again on the run.

And today's text: again the new Moses, the grown Jesus ascends a mountain. But unlike Moses he does not dispense law, but instead this sermon. The Sermon on the Mount. It is the key to understanding Matthew's Jesus. It is his Constitution; his founding document. And the Beatitudes are its preamble.

As I've said, I haven't really felt like Matthew was speaking to me in the past. These blessings don't feel like mine. But now I'm really hearing them. Or at least I'm hearing one of them: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Righteousness is one of those slightly old fashioned words that crops up mostly when we talk about being "self-righteous." That is not a good quality. We should not succumb to it – especially not now when we are all fumbling toward righteousness. Instead a better translation is "justice." Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice.

This doesn't sound like a euphemism or a circumlocution anymore. We are being starved for justice; we are parched for justice. Yesterday as I sat in the National Cathedral attending the Diocese's annual convention, I started to get reports of people detained in our airports and of others, others with valid visas, turned back and barred from continuing their journey. A Yazidi refugee, a woman – a group horrifically targeted by the Islamic State, and a woman at far greater risk than a man – with a valid visa she'd gone through months, years of

vetting to received was turned back to Iraq, prevented from joining her husband already in DC.¹

An old friend told me this past week when I expressed some concern about the President's actions in his first week of office that I wasn't understanding him. "He's not a politician; he's a doer!" And so he seems to be; he is a doer. The wheels of government can often move so slowly, grinding to a halt amidst partisan gridlock. However, with a stroke of a pen barely a week in, our president moved with terrifying speed to enact sweeping and draconian change to our refugee and immigration policies.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled." Perhaps because we tend to read these Beatitudes at funerals (it's also a text we read on All Saints' Day), we've gotten confused and think that Jesus is talking about blessings that will only be realized in some other worldly place, a heaven that we'll travel to when we die.

We've also managed to get confused about what a blessing means. Sometimes this text has been interpreted as Jesus indicating that these various states of suffering – hunger, thirst, mourning, being persecuted are good and blessed in and of themselves. That there's a spiritual good in suffering.

So let me disabuse us all of these two misconceptions. For starters, Jesus is not fetishizing those who suffer. There has been a dangerous tendency in Christianity to see suffering as salvific as if suffering itself brought closeness to God instead of God being moved by suffering to move toward suffering ones. We need to be clear: suffering is something we are called to relieve. God does not desire it for us.

¹ <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-yazidi-refugee-stranded-at-the-airport-by-trump>

And, the Kingdom of Heaven is not a place where rewards are handed out after we die. We have to be oh so careful about this because this text and others that talk about “heaven” have been used to justify oppression in this life by claiming that God will work it all out in the next life. This is a terrible reading of Matthew’s Kingdom of Heaven which is the reign of God, the beloved community. Jesus claims it is beginning in our own time even if its fullness has yet to be experienced.

What Jesus is doing is inaugurating a kingdom for those who are hurting and he’s doing it right now. And he does it by blessing. The thing about blessings is that they’re actually kind of magic. When I bless a baby at the altar who is too young to take communion, I touch their baby heads and whisper God’s presence. When I raise my hand at the end of our service and bless us all, I speak to the goodness of what we have done together and what we intend to do out in the world. It is performative: the words don’t just describe but create. Receiving a blessing is like the sun shining on your face – it is the thing it says.

Those of you who are heartsick at what is happening in our country, hear this blessing. You who are hungering and thirsting for justice, let this blessing shower warmth upon you. And in that blessing hear that we will be filled when we start doing justice.

Yesterday, Michele and others from St. Mark’s went to Dulles airport to show their support for refugees and travelers. Parishioners Agatha Tan and Tom Getman will help us understand what’s going on and what we can do at the pop up forum following this sermon. Write or call all the mosques in our area and say you’re thinking about them and ask what they need. Contact representatives. Pray, all of us pray.

Receive the blessing our God gives us by being a blessing to others. The only thing that cures a hunger for justice is justice itself. Go, be blessed, blessed, and fill yourself with justice.