

**4 Epiphany – Year A – January 30, 2011**  
**Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12**  
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It has been said that the modern disease is chronic dissatisfaction. We see it especially in the secular world, where many admit to being dissatisfied with their jobs, their spouses or partners, their families, their finances, their homes, cars, or other aspects of life. Part of the problem in a consumer society is that we are conditioned from a very early age to be dissatisfied, primarily so that we buy more, buy bigger, buy better, whatever that means to each of us. Sadly, Christians, including you and me, are not immune to feelings of chronic dissatisfaction either. It's like the elephant in the room at any parish gathering. When one or more aspects of our lives appear to be unraveling, it's a well-documented phenomenon that we will bring our irritation and disappointments, into the community of faith in some way. The things that are disturbing us deeply in our day-to-day lives manifest as grumbling discontent with this or that at church. Alternatively, we try to distract ourselves by looking for something new or exciting in a misguided attempt to find instant happiness. Perhaps we try to make ourselves feel better by putting others down. These are undoubtedly stressful times, but if we're objective, every generation could say the same thing. So the big question is what makes a Christian different, what makes us different, in how we deal with life?

Fortunately, today's Gospel reading has good news for us. The portion that we heard this morning is known as the Beatitudes. It's the introduction to Jesus' teachings in Matthew chapters 5 through 7, also called the Sermon on the Mount. Edgar A. Guest wrote that "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day; I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way." What a great way to begin our look at the Beatitudes, in the knowledge that even when our hearts are troubled, Jesus is not just telling us the way, He is walking with us.

This is one of those familiar readings, perhaps so familiar that we dismiss the specifics of Jesus' teachings as an impossible ideal. Indeed, Martin Luther used the Beatitudes in this way to emphasize the necessity of God's grace. Without diminishing the necessity, or the reality, of God's grace in our lives, we can live into the spirit of the Beatitudes when we understand that the teaching is not prescriptive, but descriptive. In other words, the blessings of God are most present to us when we adopt the attitude and characteristics of Jesus. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them. Christianity is rooted in the life of Christ, who best lives or translates the divine characteristics into daily human life. Our culture may be grounded in fear and competitiveness, but Jesus frees us from fear, to live in love. We no longer have to gaze at the Beatitudes with admiration, whilst fearful of their implications. We can live into these blessings, because they describe attitudes that can and do become the habits of our hearts, and the actions of our lives. In other words, the Beatitudes invite us into a way of being that lead to particular practices. The three ageless principles described for us in the Beatitudes are simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion. Each offers Christ's way as an alternative to greed and idolatry; dissatisfaction and despair; as well as injustice.

There are plenty of self-help books about simplifying our lives. They contain good advice about getting rid of clutter, balancing work, family and other commitments, as well as eliminating debt, all as a means to happiness and satisfaction. If we follow the advice, we may still be dissatisfied. That is unless we grasp the essence of Jesus' interpretation of the Law and the Prophets, which is how Jesus lived His life, and why we are called to discipleship. For example, the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel accounts are bursting with God's imperative to care for the poor. Specifically for Matthew, being poor *in Spirit* describes those who recognize that God's kingdom is a gift. Gratitude is therefore the appropriate response. A Christian life is a life of gratitude at all times. We thank God for our daily bread. We thank God for answering our prayers, and for not answering our prayers! We thank God through our stewardship, and by giving ourselves over to God's service. In effect, simplicity applies in the way God invites us to participate in Jesus' life and teachings. Jesus' life is simple, but not simplistic. He is blessed by God the Father, and

overflowing with humility, and unconditional love. As the embodiment of Isaiah's suffering servant, He shows us that God's peace is wrought through justice and equality, rather than violence. In response to the needs of others, Jesus offers mercy and compassion. We can live humbly by holding our opinions lightly, allowing room for God's will. We can live God's love by working for peace, advocating for the poor, and reaching out to others. Living what we believe, and doing good in Jesus' name, is a simple way of life that glorifies God.

Perhaps it's just me, but I have a hard time seeing how anyone can be hopeful in this life without knowing and loving the Lord. Hope springs to life through the Lord of all life. Jesus shines as **the** beacon of hope in the world, and we too are blessed to reflect His light. Our hope is in Christ, who is the savior and redeemer of the world, who reconciles all creation to God. Adopting a hopeful attitude isn't wishful thinking, it is trusting that God's plan of salvation is constantly unfolding, that God's kingdom is here, and that we can each make a difference as disciples of Jesus Christ. Being hopeful in the Lord is confidence born of God's gifts of wisdom and knowledge that we develop as we grow in spiritual maturity. Hopefulness grows in us, as we hunger and thirst for righteousness. Desiring God above all else, puts us into right relationship with God, and from there we establish right relations with others. Hopefulness grows in us as we live in the integrity of our faith. It is part of the inward transformation begun at our Baptism, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and manifest to the world as we put our faith into action, whilst staying grounded in the disciplines of faith. As the prophet, Jeremiah says, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:11-13). As Christians, we are blessed with hope, because Jesus walks with us, and will never forsake us.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," says Jesus. And blessed are those who are willing to walk the way of the cross, to suffer persecution and ridicule for the sake of Christ's name. Jesus' teachings are firmly rooted in Jewish thought and teaching. The difference from a Christian perspective is that we see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, and we see the Beatitudes lived out in Jesus' life. In context, the peacemakers are those who experience the fullness of God's gifts through God's *shalom*. *Shalom* is God's peace through justice. *Shalom* desires the very best for our neighbor ahead of any concern for ourselves. *Shalom* is realized in God's kingdom. And for you and me, God's kingdom is now, and can be expanded through the pursuit of God's justice for all. This is how Jesus lived a compassionate life. Compassion is beyond feeling pity for someone. It goes beyond sympathy, where we understand what the other is experiencing. Compassion goes deeper into the realms of God's love, and the depths of our interconnectedness. Compassion challenges and invites us to acts of kindness that alleviate suffering and pain, and lead to reconciliation and healing. Henri Nouwen offers us a great insight: compassion "grows with the inner recognition that [our] neighbor shares [our] humanity with [us]. This partnership cuts through all walls, which might have kept [us] separate. [It crosses] all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, [as we realize] we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end."

As we walk with the Lord in our daily lives, the Lord, our God, walks with us. He helps us to put our frustrations and dissatisfaction into proper perspective. God has, and continues to bless us all richly. The only question now, is how will we respond in a way that points to Christ and leads others to seek His blessings? In the integrity of our faith, we can show the world how real satisfaction, and the healing of all disease, are found in Christ Jesus.

Amen.