

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 5:1-12

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

February 2, 2020

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

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If you have hung around me long enough you know that I am very fond of claiming that I never get the flu (and I don't). And when I am especially bold I love to proclaim that I don't get sick at all. Not even the common cold. (I rarely do). I have convinced myself that it's the power of positive thinking, mind over matter. If I say it enough it will certainly be true.

And let's get one thing straight...I have the same reaction when I read the Beatitudes from our Gospel reading in Matthew. My first reaction is that I have absolutely no intention of being sad or hungry or desperate or weak or sick. No way, not today God! That is NOT going to happen to me.

We may laugh at the innocence or maybe the arrogance of those kind of statements. Because we know deep down it's wishful thinking that our lives will avoid those kinds of things. Things like illness or grief or financial strain or abuse. Nobody wants that kind of life...one where you get the short end of the stick. We want to be stronger or better or luckier than that. If only it were just an exercise in mind over matter, we would never have to be knocked down or caught off guard or damaged.

There are two realities that struck me as I read these familiar verses in Matthew.

- 1) Like it or not, life is going to hurt us at some point.
- 2) We can either grow from it or let it break us apart.

There are also two myths I want to debunk about some interpretations of these verses.

- 1) Hardship is created by God.
- 2) The Beatitudes glorify our hardship.

Let's start with these myths. It's easy to fall into what I want to call the "Beatitude Trap." All I mean by that is that it is easy to look at our pain or the difficult situations we are going through and blame God. Or, we tell ourselves that we deserve the pain somehow. Or worse, we start to believe that God created the pain for a reason. As in...God only gives you what you can handle.

The Beatitude Trap also tells us that there is some kind of saintly glory to pain. Because, as the narrative goes, pain is the path to "blessing." Blessed are the poor, the meek, the sick, etc. etc. And, if we aren't careful, we not only justify our own suffering, but we ignore the suffering of others thinking God is acting in ways we just don't understand so let it be.

If that is your narrative, I want you to throw it out the window right now because God doesn't want anyone to hurt. God doesn't dish out discomfort and hardship to test your faithfulness. God doesn't look at your sin and punish you with sickness or poverty or sadness.

And, because of the work that I do...I have heard all of those rationales before. I've also seen too much suffering justified in the name of God. But as Debie Thomas, a wonderful Christian writer states, *"There is nothing in the Beatitudes that excuses injustice, nothing that relativizes abuse, nothing that frees us to tell suffering people that their suffering is God-ordained and redemptive."*

Believe me when I say this...God wants you to be whole and God wants you to be filled with God's love. We must have that foundation so that we can move in and through the difficult times in our life because without that knowledge, the knowledge of God's love, we are left with only myths as our truth.

So maybe we need to think of the Beatitudes not as a justification of what is but as a promise of possibility, of what can be. In other words...God will not bless you BECAUSE of your pain but God will BLESS you out of your pain.

For me, this is about our belief that no matter what we may face, that God is going to be right there with us, strengthening us, comforting us, guiding us into possibility.

I heard a fantastic interview the other day with Lady Gaga. Many of you know her as this outlandish musician with extreme makeup and costumes and shock value stage performances. Others of you will know her from her remake of *Star is Born* with Bradley Cooper reprising the role Barbra Streisand made famous. Her outer image is one of in your face strength and grit and power. But, her outer persona was built not from a place of power but from a place of suffering, as a reaction to the pain she was experiencing in her personal life.

Lady Gaga was raped multiple times at age 19 and suffers severe traumatic stress because of the abuse she endured. She suffers from depression and chronic pain. She was at one time a cutter – trying to numb the pain she was feeling both emotionally and physically with a razor blade. She will be the first to tell you that her life was falling apart. She was the embodiment of the suffering outlined in the Beatitudes.

But Lady Gaga is also a devout Christian and has as her cornerstone a deep reliance on God. She prays every single day without fail. And when she prays, she asks God a simple question...God, what do you want me to do today? Not, God take the pain away or God make me into a different person but God, what do you want me to do today? She believes that her pain is not what defines her. Instead, she believes it is what she does with it that matters. She is determined to claim blessing out of hardship. And she became determined to help others claim that same blessing.

I thought as I listened to her that maybe this is the heart of the Beatitudes. Because remember the two realities:

- 1) Like it or not, life is going to hurt us at some point.
- 2) We can either grow from it or let it break us apart.

Debie Thomas goes on to say, *“What Jesus bears witness to in the Beatitudes is God’s unwavering proximity to pain, suffering, sorrow, and loss. God is nearest to those who are lowly, oppressed, unwanted, and broken. God isn’t obsessed with the shiny and the impressive; God is too busy sticking close to what’s messy, chaotic, unruly, and unattractive.”*

When life hurts us, God is there. God isn’t going to let us fall. God is going to help us grow and survive and thrive out of those unspeakable places of suffering. That’s the blessing.

God will not bless you BECAUSE of your pain but God will BLESS you out of your pain. And out of that blessing you are empowered to ask, God what do you want me to do today? You give back, you reach out, you lift up others and show them first-hand what that kind of blessing is all about. Your life is beautiful and needed and important. God’s blessing within you is creating a purpose which will continue to unfold as you allow that blessing to grow.

Blessed are you.

Amen.