

January 29, 2017
Annual Meeting
The Rev. Mark B. Pendleton

Beatitude Blessings, Purpose and Promise

“Is this going to be on the test?” In my days at school, there was always one student who asked the question that teachers must dread. Instead of taking in the entirety of a lecture or a lesson, some still want a shortcut to wisdom.

One gets the sense that the prophet Micah was channeling a classroom full of anxious students. What does the Lord want from me? The right animal to sacrifice: a calf or a ram or rivers or oil, or my firstborn child? None of those things, as it turns out. He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

My former bishop used to say that the problem with too many people is that they love justice and they do kindness, when it should be the other way around: we should do justice and love kindness.

The Beatitudes, or blessings, would have been for many Christians in generations past “on the test” to speak. Some things would be learned and memorized: the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, and the Creeds. The Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes come at the beginning of the Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. Jesus assumes the posture of the teacher, or rabbi, in his day and sits down as he instructs. Just as Moses needed a mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, Jesus needs a mountain as his backdrop as a setting to convey teaching of great importance. Jesus is a Moses, a David, and an Elijah all rolled into one.

Robert Warren, in his book on the Beatitudes *Living Well*, identifies a 3-fold pattern for each of the eight sayings. Each begins with an announcement of God’s blessing. Then a vocation, something the listeners were asked to emulate or nurture. And finally there is a promise, or a gift, what the person will receive if they live out their blessing and vocation.

I thought those three parts were a good way to frame a message on the day we gather at one service on the day of our Annual Meeting. How we are blessed, what is it that we are to be and do, and what promise has God offered us to meet us where we are.

Let’s talk about blessings. Let’s start at the beginning.

In very beginning of the creation story in Genesis, we read this: (1:17-18) God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and

over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. After God created all the animals, we hear again: and God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth. After creating humankind in God's image: God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

We get the point. God not only blesses and gives, but God is wholly invested in the goodness of what's been made.

God seems very pleased with creation. God seems, well, happy. Which gives us a chance to say that the same word for blessed in the Beatitudes is happy. Happy are the poor in spirit, happy are the meek, happy are the pure in heart.

When I hear the word I can't help but think of the song *Happy* by Pharell from the *Despicable Me II* movie – nominated for an Oscar and a boatload of other awards. The song seemed to come along at the right time and was a huge success. It was, to me, impossible hear it and not smile or start tapping your foot. It lifted people out of their ordinary days and reminded them that life is good – God said it was very good. The video featured people of every race, age, size, and dance ability. People around the world started making videos of themselves happy and dancing and expressing themselves. Young people in Iran were threatened by the authorities for making their own video and posting it on line: their alleged crime: happiness.

God delights in our delight. Our joy is God's.

The expression "count your blessings" is as needed today as it ever was. It is a Christian antidote of living in world that some might see as a glass half empty. It is Epiphany living, seeing and being the light in a world of darkness. It is, as the saying goes, being Easter people living in a Good Friday world.

This week was a kind of tough week in the church office. Most of us were sick with that the range of bugs floating around in the middle of winter. And we were pulling together reports and budgets to share with the congregation at today's meeting. My hope was this: I wish the words and numbers put down on paper do justice to what really goes on in and through this place.

Consider this: Blessed are those who mourn.

I was thinking about David Michaud as we prepared the reports. David died last month He was co-chaired he Search Committee that brought me to Exeter and would often volunteer in the church office. A former school principal, he had an eagle eye for editing and proof reading which I always desperately need.

I don't believe Jesus was suggesting that people who mourn experience happiness, but I do believe we can help make the moment of pain a little more bearable. Those mourning can draw closer to God.

Traditions are changing. Grieving families don't gather for wakes in people's homes as much. Visitations in funeral homes, as I experienced as a child, are less common. What a community like ours can offer can be a gift: a space and place to grieve, remember, receive and give comfort. And won't that space be a lot more inviting next fall after we renovate and make the hall more accessible.

Somewhere in the many layers of reports and budgets that we share at our Annual meeting, I hope we do not forget or ignore the blessing that it is to gather as we do. We do what Christians have always done from the first days: gather, pray, sing, confess, profess a common faith, and then experience the presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist: and then sent out into the world forgiven, healed and renewed.

On a day like this we can be thankful for Mrs. Harris and other leaders of this congregation in Exeter. For those who left bequests and trusts when they died, creating an Endowment and helping us to keep our door open for ministry. I always like to plant that a seed so perhaps others might consider the future and their legacy.

For each blessing, Jesus asked his followers to take something on.

Blessed are the meek – we are to be more gentle, kind and humble.

Blessed are those who thirst for righteousness. Happy are those who don't care so much about being right, but work and desire what is right.

The Beatitudes ask us to look at our world and say: it is right?

I may be OK, my family healthy, my neighborhood safe, my country prosperous, is it right to live without regard to the needs of others.

Blessed are those who are persecuted. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are the merciful.

It may be legal, but is it right?

Watching the news this weekend, the scene of refugees being barred entry in the United States, I for one am I am deeply concerned about the plight of refugees seeking safety in this country and the rights immigrants living in this country. Christians have a vocation of welcome – that's pretty much on the test.

When it seems like so much – what good can I do? – I think of what Mother Teresa said: If you can't feed a hundred people, then just feed one.

There came a point when I asked: what can I do.

Urged by a member of Christ Church involved with prison ministry, I have begun to volunteer at the Strafford County Jail in Dover, where there are many federal detainees awaiting hearings to see if they will be granted asylum or deported to their home countries – some of those countries will not even take them. They needed more volunteers who speak Spanish, but on my first day alone Spanish was not needed to speak with the men I met from Liberia and Nigeria. Anytime I go behind the walls of a jail or prison, I can see why Jesus included the setting in Matthew 25. One gets the sense of the collective desperation, loneliness, remorse, and longing for another chance at freedom for so many. Our role as volunteers is not to stand in judgment, but to ensure that they are treated fairly and given their rights, like the human beings they are. We are all created in God's image.

Centuries ago there were seven acts of mercy identified by the Church: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the destitute, visiting the sick, supporting prisoners, and burying the dead. (Pilgrim teaching series on the Beatitudes pg. 24)

We as individuals and a church community are engaged in all of these seven acts to one degree or another – and there is always more that can be done. The need of the world is without bounds.

Look around you and see where there is need and opportunity.

If you don't see Christ Church doing what you think can be done, I invite you to work with the staff and other leaders -- our work is to help support your passions.

So: will all of this be on the test?

There is a promise, or a gift, what the person receives if they live out their blessings and vocation. I am mindful today of the blessing of marking 25 years as a priest. I took time to consider the my life, my initial calling, my journey through the hoops of the process, studies at seminary, and all that I have learned in the five congregations I have served. When I was young, I never thought of taking this path, but clearly God had something else in mind. It is a ministry shaped by those I have served with along the way. I'm not saying it has been easy, like any of the work we might do. What I most value is the openness and honesty of those I have served. When they open their lives to me, allow me to listen to their fears and doubts and together, we plot a way to start again tomorrow. That has been the biggest gift.

When Jesus sat down to teach, his followers were asked to re-order their priorities. As for the promise given by Jesus at the end of the each of the Beatitudes.

We are free to receive what we have given away: to become and give comfort, experience a fullness of God, mercy, peace and justice.

What does the Lord require of us? To be the blessing we were made to be.