

## 4 EPIPHANY JANUARY 30, 2011 CYCLE "A"

TITLE: BLESSED ARE YOU.

READINGS: Micah 6:1-8, Ps. 15, 1Cor. 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12

Our Gospel pericope today focuses on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In Luke's Gospel it is the Sermon on the Plane. So which is it? Actually it is a collection of sayings or teachings over a period of time. Matthew gathered them together, edited them and set them down in an orderly fashion in the fifth chapter of his Gospel. This sermon is one of five collections of teachings in Matthew. We should remember that the Beatitudes are not rules for living and rewards for those who do. Rather they are the result of grace. People of the Kingdom have these qualities and in the life to come they will be rewarded. The Beatitudes harmonize with our other lessons today and I hope I am able to make a meaningful connection for you.

Like Ivory soap, 99&44/100% pure, our Gospel selection is about having a pure heart. Jesus talks about what kind of people are the happiest people, what kind of people make God happy. Those are the people, he says, with a pure heart. I am reminded of a great example of a pure heart. Once some parents had to leave their little daughter alone in their home for a time. Having made sure the doors were locked and she was secure and safe in her room, they hurried across the street to deliver some legal documents. When they returned they were afraid that they might find their daughter terribly frightened. "I wasn't afraid," she assured them, "when you are here, God expects you to take care of me; but when you are gone, he does it all by himself." When you have a pure heart, you keep your focus on God. You love God more than anything else. This little daughter certainly had a pure heart.

When we look at our first reading from Micah, today, we see the people of God sitting in a courtroom being judged. "O my people," says the Almighty, "what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!" Mic.6:3. Look what I have done for you, God says; remember the history of my saving acts. But there is no response from God's people. They have no defense. How shall they account for their sinfulness? How do they respond? "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?" Micah 6:6. Ever since the fall of humankind into sin, God's people have clung to the notion that God cannot be approached empty handed. They felt God must be placated with offerings and sacrifices. But Micah shows us that all of us must stand naked before God, without pockets, without possessions. It is not what we have that makes us acceptable to God, it is who we are. It is to be pure of heart just as our Gospel says. And how does Micah put it?

Just listen: “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Mic.6:8. These enable us to stand before God. They stem from who we are and not what we possess. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” says Jesus, “for they will see God.” Matt.5:8.

And what does that beautiful Psalm 15 say today about this very thing? “O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart.” Ps.15:1-2. This is what Paul was encouraging the Corinthians to do as he tells them God chose them not because they were wise, healthy or prestigious, but on the contrary, they came from the dregs of society, the poor, slaves, women and children. They have really only one reason to boast; Christ who saved them by his death on the cross. The saved, he says, are not the rich, powerful, or wise, but they who believe in Jesus.

Finally we come to this wonderful Gospel reading today. In Matthew it is the Sermon on the Mount. His reason for choosing this location for this important message is that he understands the teaching of Jesus here as the new law corresponding to the Old Law given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, and for Matthew, Jesus is the second Moses, the giver of the New Law.

Here Jesus addresses all of his disciples who had left everything to follow him. They are the poor in spirit, the pure of heart. They are the ones who realize that spiritually they are the have-nots who have no righteousness of their own and therefore hunger and thirst for God’s righteousness. Right here is where we stand, dear people of God, in the justice, kindness and humility of which Micah speaks. Right here is where we stand, dear family of Bethany, totally dependent hungering and thirsting for righteousness to be bestowed upon us by the Father through his Son. Right here is where we stand, dear Body of Jesus Christ, begging to be poor in spirit, and pure in heart.

When I was a hospice chaplain, I remember going to a home and visiting a man who had bone cancer. Bill was a man with a very loving wife and three children, a son and two daughters. His cancer was well advanced and he suffered extreme pain despite the heavy medication he was on. He was a very committed Christian and his family as well. I visited him many times, prayed and counseled with him as well as took him communion several times. Often we had talked about his dying. We had even had discussions with his wife and children. There was no doubt in my mind

that Bill and his family had accepted God's will and that he would be calling him home soon. I often thought of two of the Beatitudes in regard to his wife and children. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted," and "Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy."

I'll never forget my last visit to Bill just before he died. I gathered with his family around his bedside and we talked, we prayed, we laughed. I told Bill good-bye and blessed him and his family. His last words to me will last for a lifetime: "O pastor," he said, "I am so very blessed for my God has blessed me, forgiven me and promised me a place in his Kingdom. I have a wife who loves me and cares tenderly for me. I have three wonderful children who honor me, respect me and love me deeply. I embrace my pain as my savior did his. I am thankful for my faith and for all those who love me. I am ready to meet my Lord, and look forward to his peace, and his glory." He died the following day. Thanks be to God, I was able to call Bill my friend and brother in Christ! And Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God." **Amen.**

**Pastor Barney**