

Year A, January 29, 2017
4 Epiphany
Christ Church, Mexia

"The party aboard ship was in full swing. Speeches were being made by the captain, the crew and the guests enjoying the week-long voyage. Sitting at the head table was a seventy-year-old man who, somewhat embarrassed, was doing his best to accept the praise being poured on him. Earlier that morning a young woman had apparently fallen overboard, and within seconds this elderly gentleman was in the cold, dark waters at her side. The woman was rescued and the man became an instant hero. When the time finally came for the brave passenger to speak, the stateroom fell into a hush as he rose from his chair. He went to the microphone and, in what was probably the shortest 'hero's' speech ever offered, spoke these stirring words: 'I just want to know one thing - who pushed me?'" (Engstrom, *Motivation to Last a Lifetime*)

I feel led today to talk with you about courage - because courage I think is something that we all need, especially today. And I speak of courage in the way of William Secker, a 17th century clergyman: "Another singular action of a sanctified Christian is to prefer the duty he owes to God to the danger he fears from man."

The Beatitudes from the gospel reading this morning are probably one of the best-known passages of the gospel, but they may also be one of the most debated passages with regard to meaning. For many, they are generally considered not to be imperatives, or entrance requirements for the Kingdom of Heaven. They are said to be written in the indicative mode - in other words, Jesus is not asking people to become poor in spirit or meek or persecuted, rather he is offering consolation to those who find themselves in these situations in the somewhat oppressive and tense environment of the first century - the primary audience to whom he is speaking.

Marcia Riggs, professor of ethics at Columbia Theological seminary, writes however: "...the theological heart of the Beatitudes is a call to be disciples who live out the virtues of the blessings in the pursuit of righteousness grounded in God's righteousness (God's steadfast love, goodness, justice, and mercy)." That would require courage.

In a similar vein, Charlie Cook, professor emeritus from the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin and my teacher in pastoral care at Iona,

observes that while we are somewhat awed by the poetic beauty of the blessings, we seem to be overwhelmed by what we see as the impracticality of them. This is especially true, when we live in times when blessings seem to be given to those who succeed, often at the expense of others, in our manmade economic and sociopolitical systems. In his words, "To be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful, and meek will get you nowhere in a culture grounded in competition and fear."

Still Charlie believes that despite our assessment of them as an impossible challenge for ordinary living, Jesus meant the Beatitudes to be for everyone. According to Charlie: "Living daily into the spirit of the Beatitudes involves looking at them as a collection of the whole, rather than looking at each one individually. Each is related to the others, and they build upon one another." Those who attended Richard's study of the Sermon on the Mount a while back should recall that he made that same point. Charlie continues, "If we approach the Beatitudes in this way, we see they invite us into a way of being in the world that leads to particular practices. There are three principles for living into the spirit of the Beatitudes: simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion. These three principles allow us to be in the world, while not being shaped totally by it."

Simplicity, does not mean a lack of sophistication, but rather in attempting to hear the words of Jesus in the way he meant them, not in the way we would prefer to hear them, for example. Fortunately, we are likely to receive more courage than fear "when we hear Jesus saying, 'You are blessed in this life whenever you demonstrate humility, bring a peaceful presence, open your heart to others, and show mercy on those who cry for it.'"

"The distinguished theologian Jurgen Moltmann (*Theology and Joy*) stated that the death knell of the church is when the overall attitude moves from anger to cynicism. Cynicism differs from anger. Cynicism has decided to accept whatever is, regardless of the consequences. Cynicism (thus) offers little hope that things will get better." Christ Jesus (on the other hand) offers hope to all. This world in which we live needs to be hopeful! "When we are hopeful, we stand in the world sure of the possibility that the day will come when mercy, humility, peace and love are the descriptions of what it means to live," says Charlie.

Now compassion is neither pity nor sympathy. It's much more. "The late Henri Nouwen offers us an insightful description: compassion

'grows with the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. This partnership (should cut) through all the walls that which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end.'"

While we can always find distinctions, we must always bear in mind that we all, all, share in being created in the image of God, and thus we are family. Compassion, therefore, is vital, if we are to represent and to be true to the kingdom of God.

Living with a commitment to simplicity, hopefulness and compassion is something we can all do. It will require a great deal of prayer, energy, determination, and courage, but if we live in that way we will eventually come to see that it isn't that irrational after all. Rather it is the only truly rational approach to living.

As Tom Wright puts it, the point of the Sermon on the Mount, and especially the Beatitudes, is to begin to live in the present in the way that we understand God's promised future. Because that future arrived with Jesus, when Jesus became incarnate. And although it may seem upside down, particularly when judged by our current culture, we are called to believe – requiring great courage, a courage we may not believe that we have – to believe that it is, in fact, the right way to live.

In the name of the One God - the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.