

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Throughout this season of Epiphany, we have been following Jesus as he begins his 3-year ministry. From his first miracle at the wedding in Cana, he has been travelling throughout the region bringing healing and hope to many people. As we pick up the story this morning, Jesus is ready to preach to the crowds that have gathered around him. At this point, he has selected all 12 of the disciples. Based on the description of where the crowd is from – and we are told that they come from Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon – it is reasonable to think that this story is probably happening near the north shore of the sea of Galilee. The sermon that Christ preaches has become known as the Sermon on the Plain, and it acts as a kind of bookend to the first sermon that he gave in his hometown Synagogue three weeks ago in our reading from Luke's Gospel. In between those sermon events, Jesus has performed many miracles of healing. Jesus is very generous in sharing this gift of healing, and we hear that in the words, *"And everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them."* We know from all 4 of the Gospel accounts that Jesus was a very charismatic and inspiring person, and I think it would be safe to think that the healing that he brought also included healing of the spirit for those who heard him.

We know that Christ's first sermon in the synagogue was likely intended as a kind of introduction to this ministry which was to be about social justice. You may recall the words that he read from the scroll of Isaiah: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* The words that he shares with the crowds in this Sermon on the Plain this morning are very consistent with those that he read from the scroll of Isaiah. I think it is interesting that he originally frames this sermon around a series of blessings, but then contrasts that with a series of woes. But he makes it clear that the poor and the marginalized of society belong to God. He tries to impress upon them that their suffering, as real as it is, will be offset by great joy in the next life. We have to remember that Jesus,

himself, comes from a very humble home life. All that he has endured during his times of fasting, of being alone out on the desert, of being hated by the crowds at points when he exercises his ministry – all of this serves to allow him to empathize with the people that he is now ministering to.

This sermon – which gives us a kind of foreshadowing to the Sermon on the Mount – is directly linked to the everyday realities of the people gathered around Jesus. These are the hungry, the sick, the poor, and the outcasts of society. Jesus does not gloss over that reality, but instead speaks directly to their suffering. This crowd would likely have some familiarity with the psalms which often dealt with the realities of life for people at that time. When you think about it, some of the psalms are pretty grim. But Jesus matches those hard realities with promises of a better life ahead; albeit a life that comes only after death. The promise of laughter instead of tears is something that is heard throughout the Old Testament, and it speaks to the idea of God taking action. For example, Isaiah 25 included the statement: *“And the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces.”* What Jesus is ultimately telling this crowd is that God has not forgotten them, and that He never will. Throughout all of the challenges of this life, they can count on the fact that God is with them as they journey.

As we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these words are pretty familiar to us. We will hear them again in a slightly different way with the Sermon on the Mount in the weeks ahead. But, if we take a moment to put ourselves in the shoes of the people who heard this message for the first time, we have to remember that this would have been quite revolutionary. In that society in that part of the world 2000 years ago, people tended to accept the idea that you were born into a certain station in society. If you were born poor, then you likely were going to live out your life in poverty. If you were born rich, then you were probably pretty ruthless in keeping what you had and you were probably pretty ruthless in trying to multiply your wealth. If you had power or social status – things that came along with wealth – then you likely were pretty protective of that as well. The notion of sharing wealth, power, and privilege was not a commonplace idea for these people. But

Jesus comes along and preaches these sermons that not only demand sharing, but also offer condemnation of those who have the ability to share but do not.

In a similar vein, people who were afflicted with some kind of physical or emotional challenge tended to think that they were somehow responsible for their own afflictions. Or, they may have assumed that their situation was caused by their parents. As we get closer to Easter, we will hear the story of the blind man who was healed by Jesus and was suddenly able to see. The priests will challenge Jesus on this, demanding to know if it was the sin of the blind man that caused his inability to see or if it was the sin of his parents that was the source of his blindness. Jesus will again tell them something that is quite shocking to them when he says that neither is to blame, but that the state of the man's blindness prompted an action of healing. The miracle of healing was a way to glorify God.

Middle Eastern society of 2000 years ago was very quick to take responsibility for their own troubles in a way that would be unthinkable to us today. They had a kind of fatalistic approach to life events, believing that most things were predetermined by fate. We know from history that the ancient Greeks and Romans had a very strong belief in fate and much of ancient mythology speaks to that. But Jesus reminds them in today's reading of the importance of free will as a God-given gift and that they can make choices that will bring them closer to God. Unlike mortal life on Earth, what happens after death and into eternity is not predetermined by your station or circumstances in this life. There is the matter of choice in this life for all people along that spectrum of wealth and poverty; along that spectrum of power and being marginalized; along that spectrum of privilege and being disenfranchised.

It is interesting that our Gospel passage for this morning begins with the words, *"Then he looked up at his disciples and said..."*. Jesus is using this Sermon on the Plain to also teach the disciples, to help them to better understand his ministry and the work of social justice that they will need to carry on after he leaves them. In that same way, as modern-day disciples, Jesus speaks directly to us this morning to use our lives and our relative wealth to bring relief to the hungry, to the poor, and to the marginalized. In doing so, we will find ourselves blessed in ways that we have not imagined. My prayer for all of us

this, week, including myself, is that we will seek out opportunities to hear the words of Jesus as the first disciples heard them and that we will be inspired to take action. Amen.