Epiphany 6, Year C

February 16, 2025

There are things and people in our lives that we know will always be there. As disciples of Christ, for example, there’s the Lord’s Prayer: *Our Father…..*

We often say it at warp speed, on auto-pilot, rushing through the words since we have known them from our childhood Sunday School classes. On the one hand, it’s a great comfort to be able to fall back on those words, not unlike the 23rd Psalm, to say them under even the most horrific of circumstances. On the other hand, we should occasionally take the time – perhaps as we’re sitting here, quietly waiting for our service of worship to begin – to savor those words, to listen to what we are saying about God, what we are asking of God, what we are saying about ourselves.

*The Beatitudes* is another of those things that has been instilled in our hearts and minds since forever: everyone knows them, everything about them has already been said, what more can be said. Eyes close, listening switches off.

Somewhere, long ago, a Bible study facilitator asked, “Is there another word we could use rather than ‘blessed?’” How about “holy?” I ask.

*Holy are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*Holy are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*

*Holy are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*

*Holy are you when people hate you…. on account of the Son of Man.*

We have quite a different account of this event in Matthew’s Gospel, where it is known as a portion of The Sermon on the Mount. Whereas in Matthew’s account, Jesus and his followers seek a higher place away from the crowd, in Luke

“Jesus came ***down*** with the twelve apostles and ***stood on a level place***, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said….”

Jesus and his twelve chosen messengers become one with the crowd, they meet the people where they are. In fact, Jesus has placed himself lower even than his followers, as he must “look up at them” before he begins to speak:

*Holy are you when people hate you and exclude you and revile you and defame you for my sake.*

Speaking personally, the next portion of today’s Gospel is the difficult part because I am straight, white, privileged, of British ancestry, in a word “All-American.” Of course, there have been bumps in the road along the way, but I’ve never lost a limb or a faculty or my home or a member of my family other than by natural causes: in short, I am rich, I am full, I can laugh at times and I have friends.

These “woe to yous” have greatly affected Christian history over the centuries, in some cases tragically. Beginning in the second century, men and women known as anchorites wandered into wilderness situations to live solitary lives, looking to prayer and study and very little else for nourishment. In the Middle Ages, there was a group of extreme Christian zealots – the Flagellants - who publicly beat themselves in an attempt to replicate Jesus’ suffering and self-denial. Less extreme were communities where men and women lived separately from one another and took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. And in the late Middle Ages we hear of mystics, those who lived solitary lives, away from the world and its pleasures in hopes of climbing the spiritual ladder to its summit where their personal relationship with Christ would be fully realized. The problem with extreme self-denial as I see it is it denies God: it denies God’s declaration that good dwells in all of God’s creatures; it denies that our bodies, souls, hearts and minds are the dwelling place of God. How can we be a fit tabernacle for God if we deny the goodness of ourselves? Am I cursed with woe because I have a full life in this world? Should I feel guilty because I have enough food to eat, water to drink and at times am tickled by humor?

I believe the intent behind all of this is that the poor, the hungry, the lonely, the unloved, those who don’t have enough are to be the reason for life; that our default should be ministry to them; that our gratefulness for what we have should always be darkened by the profound sadness that most people in the world have very little; that the minute complacency sets in, we can be sure there’s a train coming down the tracks, aiming for us and there’s no escape. My first sentence this morning was there are things and people in our lives we know will always be there: they include at the very least the Lord’s Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, the poor and needy, and Jesus Christ. May they find a permanent dwelling place in our hearts and with God’s grace, may we always be ready to respond to them.