



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, JANUARY 29, 2023
MICAH 6:1-8; PSALM 15; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31; MATTHEW 5:1-12

HEALING TRANSFORMATION MADE REAL THROUGH PRAYER

Matthew 5:1-12 [When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”]

It has been another hard and heavy week. Gun violence and police violence have left families across the country mourning lost loved ones. Communities in Monterey Park and Half Moon Bay: devastated by mass shootings, and the grieving family and Memphis community of Tyre Nichols

living through the unimaginable pain of seeing for themselves what happened to the one they cherished. There is great suffering, there is great pain.

We are a society built on violent, unjust systems of power from which injustice has

flowed for centuries, and violence in all its forms begets violence. We yearn for change and more than a change of who's in charge, more than a few structural tweaks to an imperfect system; we yearn for a healing change, a healing change born from within each person, and within each community, a healing transformation that brings us all to see justice as primary, love and care for one another as primary. This surely is our prayer.

Many of us may feel powerless in the face of such large, societal issues, we might feel small and insignificant, each of us doubting what role we could possibly play in bringing about the change we long for, we are each after all 'just one person'. And some of us may feel weary, exhausted by continuing the fight begun by ancestors against injustices which have brought continuing oppression, fear, violence and death to communities and families for generations.

Depending on who we are, where we are in all this, we're going to feel this differently, will need to be healed

differently, be transformed differently, but it is with our desire for healing transformation that we must all begin if we are to break the cycle of ongoing violence. Whether we're fighting to right wrongs or crying out to make our pain and grief heard by a world that doesn't seem to care ... we are called to gather together, as Church, to be together, to be healed and to heal, together, to pray together.

We join Matthew's gospel narrative, today, as word has spread, amongst Jews and Gentiles alike, amongst the powerless and the powerful alike, word has spread of Jesus' power to heal, and great crowds begin to follow him, the need for Jesus' healing is immense. Matthew tells us Jesus cured "every disease and every sickness among the people."¹ Jesus had come to heal ... every disease and every sickness, every pain, and every sorrow, Jesus has come to heal every injustice and usher in an age of transformation through the power of love, the power of love as it flows between us and God and the love that can

¹ Matthew 4:23

flow between us all, if we can just learn how to let it.

In his sermon on the mount, the Gospel reading we just heard, Jesus teaches his disciples, he offers them a kingdom vision for humanity, transformed humanity, humanity that has freed itself from its dependency on worldly power. It's not an easy teaching to receive, the radical change it promises is not an easy one to imagine given we are immersed in a society, in a world, that's organized around hierarchies of power, and built on the ideals of self-sufficiency and individualism ... but our faith is trust, trust in the truth we are taught by the one who has come to restore us, to heal us, and to set us free from the cycles of violence and death.

The very first of Jesus' sayings is the one from which all the others seemingly flow, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This is where it all begins: being poor in spirit. St John Chrysostom, one of the early Church Fathers, believed spirit, in this context, to

² Barbu, Liviu. 2009. "The 'Poor in Spirit' and Our Life in Christ: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective on Christian

be "the rational soul capable of free choice."² Being poor in spirit is, then, a reference to those who *choose* humility, who choose not to wield power over another.

That it is a choice is crucial to fully understand what Jesus is saying. The kingdom of heaven is not being offered here as a consolation for those who are forced into powerlessness by circumstance, by system or by another.

Instead, humility, being poor in spirit, is the antidote to an arrogant pride. Such an arrogant pride, believed St. John Chrysostom, is an indication that our essential relationship with God has been forgotten, the self-centered, prideful one coming to equate themselves with God,³ claiming and using power over others, to control and dominate. The western world has a long and bloody history of acting out of this kind of pride, the claiming and wielding of god-like power, and the legacy of this is still being lived today in systems and communities and in homes across our country.

Discipleship." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22 (3), 264.

³ Ibid.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven: that is, blessed are those whose lives reflect through humility our true dependency on God and one another. Blessed are the ones who refuse to wield worldly power over others, in a god-like manner, choosing instead to consciously and intentionally live in a way that reflects the reality that we are all interconnected. To be poor in spirit is to make these choices and to have our dependency on God shape our lives, infuse our being, guide our thinking and prompt our doing. And so, to be poor in spirit is to pray, is to lead with prayer.

Prayer is our power. When we pray, we are affirming our dependency on God for

all that we are, and we are choosing to step away from a destructive dependence on worldly power. That God is the source of all healing is given voice in every prayer that's formed, prayers for the healing of our brokenness and our broken heartedness, prayers for the healing of the world around us.

Our prayers are the root of our power and our progress toward the change we are yearning for as we each and together make real our ongoing transformation in Christ ... as we reach for communion with God – what greater healing change for the world could there be than that.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL