

Wisdom 1:12-3:1 (excerpts)
Psalm 98 sung
1 Corinthians 1:26-31
Matthew 5:1-12

The Beatitudes: A Call to Action **February 3, 2008 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

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The Beatitudes introduce the Sermon on the Mount. They constitute the opening comments of Jesus, set the tone, and make a bold, courageous countercultural statement. The Beatitudes are a call to action.

They also introduce a key theme of the sermon: What is true righteousness? Is it faithfulness to the law, as in traditional Judean faith? Jesus suggests otherwise. When he takes his seat on the mountain to teach, he does as Moses did. He introduces a true interpretation of righteousness and stands up to the religious and political powers of his time.

The Beatitudes contravene aspects of ancient Judean religion and non-religious culture because they give value to people disregarded in both. In ancient religion, wealth and political power were often viewed as proof of God's favor. Thus, the poor were poor because they were "out of favor" with God. This theological concept cleverly benefits its inventors. It justifies the poverty of the masses and, simultaneously, supports the wealthy class, their wealth taken as a sign of God's favor. This theology relieves the rich of responsibility for the poor, providing a neat, philosophical basis to treat the poor as "society's trash".

We can get a feel for the radical quality of Jesus' beatitudes by turning them inside out. Listen to them. Do they sound familiar? "Blessed are the rich in spirit. Blessed are they who suffer no losses. Blessed are the strong, indifferent to the needs of others, who pursue their own interests with no regard for the consequences to others. Blessed are the powerful with authority to judge. Blessed are the dirty of heart. Blessed are the war-makers. Blessed are the persecutors, especially the persecutors of Jesus' followers." This inversion of Jesus' teaching is shocking to hear. But Jesus perceived these as the

beatitudes of his culture and they remain the beatitudes of contemporary culture, both in the Vatican and secular life.

Jesus' disciples learn in the Beatitudes that true righteousness and God's wisdom are the opposite of mainstream cultural assumptions. They learn that the truly righteous are not those official religion and mainstream culture endorse.

The reading from the book of Wisdom embraces a vision similar to that of the Beatitudes, but conveys the vision differently. It articulates, then criticizes, the views of the religious and cultural status quo: Enjoying oneself to the detriment of creation, drinking expensive wine, using expensive perfumes, oppressing the righteous - even widows and the elderly; embracing might as right, labeling the weak as useless members of society; lying in wait for those who speak inconvenient truths; seeing people who believe themselves God's children as strange, a burden, people to be insulted, tortured and killed. The Wisdom writer affirms that this viewpoint is "blind" to God's vision of how the world should be; but because those who embrace the status quo benefit from it, they do not experience themselves as blind; rather they experience those who see with divine vision as useless, unworthy of life. They even use religion against the righteous telling themselves that, if the righteous are God's children, God will save them from the torture the status quo inflicts.

The Wisdom writer's description of the viewpoint of those who live for themselves, without regard to the needs of others, strikes a profoundly contemporary tone, one that struck home clearly last night for me. A dear friend had urged me to view the film "Sicko", controversial Michael Moore's latest. After months of repeated reminders, I finally saw the film last night. And I cried. I cried because the health care to which I have access is unavailable to so many. I cried because I haven't lost a beloved spouse in his youth because insurance denied a bone marrow transplant. I cried because I didn't lose a child in infancy because I couldn't seek treatment at the nearest hospital. I cried because race and status make a difference. I cried because profit margins and the enrichment of some individuals take precedence over other human lives. I cried because there is evidence that our health care system, that creates these deadly disparities, was created by leaders who understood what they were doing and lied to us about what we were getting. I cried because, if I had different insurance, or no insurance, my cancer - which is likely treatable, maybe even curable - would take my life. I cried because even in a country I've been told is "third world" health care is available

to all citizens, even visiting foreigners. I cried because I feel helpless to make it better for others, even as I benefit.

So I welcome the jolt of Jesus' beatitudes as we turn to the season of Lent. And it is a jolt. After all, I fit into several categories occupied by the status quo. I search the beatitudes trying to find just one that assures me of blessing in God's sight. I ask myself, "Have I been so blessed with the riches of this world that I have lost any hope of living God's vision?" Jesus stood up to the religious and political authorities of his time. Have I?

The answer to that question lies in the paradox. Paul gets the paradox that the weak are strong, and the strong are weak. He writes that both can be changed by the transforming power of faith to make us different and to empower us to live differently. As Nancy Corran writes, "The alchemy that God works in the "weak" is a wondrous thing." So I console myself: God can do this alchemy even in me. God can empower me to stymie the rich and powerful, to empower those who are not, to be willing to have less so that others might have more, to bring about a more just world, not just for me but for all. God's wisdom, articulated by Jesus, grasped by Paul, is the source of hope. Hope is in God. God's kin-dom can be on earth as it is in heaven, if we let God do God's work in us, so that we might do God's work for others.