February 2, 2020 • Holy Communion

“Blest Are They”
Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

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.

Two Sundays ago, we heard the story of Jesus’ call of his first disciples, and last Sunday, we heard, in the voices of our youth and youth counselors, how the call of Jesus has put a claim on their lives.

They led us in worship, saying: “As we grow in faith, we discover God who is abundant love; and we seek to share God’s love in all ways. We love with authenticity; and we bridge that which separates us. We hold onto what is right; and we love each other like family. We contribute to the needs of God’s people; and we show hospitality to strangers. Above all we rejoice in hope, are patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer. This is how we share God’s love.”

This is how Jesus does ministry—by inviting others to become part of it with him. The very first thing Jesus did was to call followers to become part of something new and immediately empower them to do the same, to invite more followers. He began building a new community, showing them the new thing God was doing in their midst, the light dawning in his very presence, the Kingdom of Heaven drawing near, and he invited them to invite others to follow.

Remember how he reached out to all those around him, casting a wide net, saying: “Hey. God has sent us some really good news. I want you to be part of living into it, bringing who you are and what you know, the gifts you already have—to reach out and share this great good news with others so that God’s light may shine in their places of darkness as well as in yours.”

Jesus, this divine free agent of mercy and grace, set out to expand and deepen people’s experience of God through this new community of faithful living and speaking and healing that brings wholeness and happiness and light, changing humanity from the inside out. He’s still calling us now to become his disciples, his followers, transformed ourselves to transform the world.

What would that look like in our lives? What does the Kingdom of Heaven look like, when lived out? Jesus describes it in the familiar and beautiful words of the Beatitudes we hear today, these marks of blessedness, signs of how the kingdom of heaven looks when reflected in our lives. Jesus said: “Blessed are….the poor in spirit, those who mourn who will find comfort, the meek, who will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. And blessed are you when persecuted for all these things, for you will find your reward in heaven, in the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus knew that his followers would only have a real impact on others if that new kingdom began to be reflected in their very lives. Remember how Francis of Assisi put it? “Preach all the time. Use words only when necessary.” That’s another way of saying, if you want to invite others to become followers, to become part of this new kingdom that is beginning here and now, then your very lives must witness to what you have heard and seen, to what you believe to be coming to us from God in Christ Jesus.

Jesus knew that people would look at him and look at his followers and judge. If all they saw was the same old, same old—if they couldn’t see anything new happening in them, they’d turn away. Why bother? Empty words don’t change lives. Platitudes and canned sermons don’t change lives. “Do as I say, not as I do,” doesn’t cut it. People, then as now, want authenticity. They want integrity. They need to trust those who invite them into this new community of love.
Jesus did not say that you have to be all these things before you can join in. No—he’s saying that as you join in, as you follow me, as you live into this good news, you will begin to change. From the inside out. These qualities, these attributes, will begin to manifest themselves in you.

The Beatitudes are Jesus’ invitation into Christian life, into Christian spirituality, his invitation to deep faith and authentic living, his invitation to find the Kingdom of Heaven within, and live from that place. As Brendan Freeman, a Trappist monk from Iowa, has said, the Beatitudes “draw our hearts out of themselves into a new way of understanding [and living] our lives.”

And as we do so, we start to look different, to sound different, to act differently. When we live from a deep place of love, and grace, and blessedness, others will want to become part of this as well.

This may be especially important in our times when there are fewer and fewer people in churches, or faith communities of any kind for that matter. Because whether we’re inside or outside, we all have similar spiritual needs. We all long for meaning and purpose. We all long to connect with something holy and deep and enduring. We want to know that our lives matter. We seek authenticity and integrity, in ourselves and in others. We yearn for hope, to trust that this world can and should be a better place.

For many of us, outside and inside the church, there remains a deep sadness within us, fear that we will never measure up, that no matter how much we have or achieve, it will never be enough. Worry that the world can never become the place of righteousness and peace we yearn for. We are those who mourn, if we admit it, those whose hearts are broken, those whose hearts are deeply troubled, whose desires are frustrated, those who feel deeply confused and adrift.

To us all, Jesus says: “Follow me. The kingdom of heaven is near.”

Jesus is giving us a picture of who we are becoming, as we follow him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. This is a gift from God that changes us from the inside out and makes us ambassadors for Christ by all that we do and say and are and pray to be. Perfect? Not by a long shot. But becoming those who are willing, as Paul said, to “put on Christ.” And then to follow where that leads us.

And in following, we will find peace and purpose and joy. Not as the world gives, Jesus says. A different peace, that is of God and that is God’s gift to us all, for us all, and for the transformation of the world.

As we come to the table of grace this morning, may we experience that peace, that abundance, that help, that joy, that new life in Christ, and find in this holy sacrament strength and courage and hope for all that is to come.

Amen.