

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. God of our Epiphany dreams and realities in this Kingdom, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

What was last week's Bible reading that went with Scout Sunday? Beatitudes, that's right. These lofty verses tend to do something quite contrary to Christian discipleship and living, and I'd like to talk about that. There's two things we need to look out for before we move forward in Matthew's Gospel. The first is that we don't regard these as Jesus' words, but a set of principles, a collection of rules, or maybe we just see them as a happier version of the Ten Commandments.

These aren't a bunch of forbidden 'thou shalt nots', but encouragement to be rewarded as happy and blessed if we do the right thing. God gives us carrots, not sticks, and we love quoting these to everyone within

earshot. Heck, beatitudes are the ancient forerunner of Dale Carnegie. How to win friends and influence people, and we can even get eternal happiness with it.

We see these principles extended to all kinds of self-help genres. A whole bunch of people pick up the ethical principles of Jesus and copyrighted trademarks, companies, and make tons of money off of Jesus. We talked about that with the kids, didn't we, about Star Wars? Christ's teachings are so much easier without the interfering personality of Jesus to bother with.

And this is consistent with human nature. We like the stability of commandments, rules, principles, theorems, laws, don't we? And all these frameworks we surround ourselves with are important to us, and if we do them just right then we'll have peace, prosperity, power, and perfection. Beatitudes are a recipe for virtue. If we just get these in the right

order and proportion then we can all cook like Rachel Ray, or Julia Child, or Bobby Flay.

But here's the thing. I've bought those cookbooks, and maybe you have too. Yeah? And no matter how well we follow the recipe, even if we have the same cookware and get fresh herbs and all, the meal we cook misses just a little something than when they cook it on TV. We love good cooking mostly because we love good cooks; it's personality, not the principles of cooking, that matter. Same with the beatitudes and the Bible, I'm afraid.

What makes the beatitudes worthwhile is not their essential correctness. They sound so impossible. (Say a few). But the power here is not in the principle, but between teacher and the taught. The personality and authority of the beatitudes lies in not the rule, but the lives of the people who hear, believe, and act. So let's remember...the first things toward giving the beatitudes renewed power are that

they concern people, right here right now. They are not just abstract principles.

The second thing about the Beatitudes is that we always tell ourselves the good part comes later. My father would tell me as a six-year old to eat spinach, just like Popeye, and I'd be strong just like Popeye. Now, all kids are expected to eat veggies at times. For some supposed future benefit, like strength of some cartoon guy, but I didn't really believe it and didn't eat spinach for years nor was I all that strong. But the power of Jesus' message is that now, right now, not later, when we mourn we have happiness and when we're persecuted we have joy. When we link Jesus as the messenger, the beatitudes have strength. **RIGHT NOW**, as we eat our spinach right here, we're strong.

Our Bible robs us of the context of how the original languages captured this text. In ancient Greek, these weren't statements. They were exclamations of present reality.

Let's do that. Rather than say, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy" let's say, "NOW mercy for those who are merciful"! or "NOW happiness and kingdom of heaven for those poor in Spirit"! See what happened?

Tomorrow has become today. The Kingdom that is to come is already here. That which we seek, we have. That whom we would be, we ARE! Let's not get too pithy and just say this is all there is. But think about this: those who live in expectation of faith live the experience of faith.

The Gospel is the good news right here, right now, in this holy place, TCC, with us, God's holy people. Our reward is spinach, and it makes us strong today. And so what are we supposed to do with that strength?

What must we do to let our light shine?
We, the ordinary people of Townsend?

Well, in the first place, it's not always our doing that counts. Sometimes it's just in

being, and that's a hard thing to swallow for folks who are achievement focused. Being comes from within.

And so does light. Light shines out, it radiates from a point and gets into every corner it can, doesn't it? Light doesn't shine into itself to illuminate.

All of us have had light in our paths of life. The folks who shone that light were ordinary, a teacher, a friend, a child, a store clerk. And there are countless other instances wherein we will never be aware of who was at the right place at the right time, who gave us light at a difficult time.

And we're salt. But we're not the whole meal; that's too much burden, and there are others who have their roles in this world. But we are to add flavor, raising eyebrows so that people exclaim, "oh, WOW, that's really GOOD!" And our job is complete, because we may not have done anything else but reminded that person of THEIR personage,

THEIR creation, THEIR being and specialness as a child of God. And hopefully they'll want to know how to add flavor to everything too.

Let me leave you with this. If God is to be known, it is through ordinary folks like us. And that knowledge will be through the lives of folks who are redeemed through and by God's love. For better or worse, WE are the Good News of the Gospel. WE are the light of the world. But we cannot wait for some date in the future, and we don't need better music, prayers, sermons, or any other rules to make us the Good News. God awaits our hands. Our hearts. Our fellowship, imperfect as it is and imperfect as we are. So let your light so shine before all so they can see what God has created here, and may we be more joyful this day and every day.

Thanks be to God, Amen.