

1.29.2023 Epiphany 4

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

“Blessed are you”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

In two days, on January 31st, we will celebrate our 164th anniversary as St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. This congregation was organized on this date in 1859, and as we also gather today for our Annual Meeting, we have an opportunity to meditate upon who we are as a church and what drives our mission.

The prophet Micah writes, “*What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” Generations of St. Mark’s members and friends have answered Micah’s question by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. These things describe a state of being and acting as Christians and as a congregation. Micah’s words describe “service” and the “humility of faith” as we respond to God’s invitation, faithfully walking together in service to our neighbors in church and society.

Today’s Annual Meeting isn’t simply an administrative task, rather, it is a “visible sign” of our commitment as Christ’s body to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God in this city and beyond. For 164 years people in this congregation have heard the good news proclaimed, and like them, we also continue to respond with joy and generosity in this place.

Yet if you think 164 years is a long time, consider today’s gospel reading. The Beatitudes of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount have set the direction of Christian proclamation and mission for over two millennia. To respond to Jesus’ call to follow him means we are a part of something much larger than our own lives and our own generation.

Though the gospel message is ancient, we do not live in the past; we live squarely in the present. We follow Jesus’ proclamation that the kingdom of heaven can be experienced now, as we hunger and thirst for righteousness, as we are merciful, as we strive to be peacemakers, and as we suffer for righteousness’ sake. Jesus calls all who experience these things “blessed,” because they are living into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus makes it abundantly clear that God loves this world, choosing the poor, the meek, the pure in heart, and the persecuted as the object of God’s love.

Jesus’ first words in the Beatitudes, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*” define God’s mission to all who seek to follow him. Like the prophet Micah, Jesus is preaching in the prophetic tradition of Israel, proclaiming that God desires humanity to be God’s hands and voices of mercy, justice and

peace in this world.

Jesus does not say, “Blessed are the rich, the haughty, powerful, the mighty, or those who wage war and kill the weak.” No. Jesus proclaims that the good news of God’s kingdom comes to those who are poor, vulnerable and who experience unjust oppression and persecution in this world. Jesus’ words remind us that as a church we are called to share the good news of God’s love for the “least of these” in our own community and beyond.

The words, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*” are also spoken to each of us. We are called “blessed” when we realize our own poverty of spirit and our utter need of a Savior. For 164 years people have been coming into this congregation with a need for forgiveness, reconciliation and healing. We are no different than the saints who have occupied these same pews before us. A saint is not someone who has led a perfect life; a saint is someone who realizes their own poverty of spirit and their need of Jesus and the things of heaven. Everything begins with the realization of our own need of God’s grace and forgiveness. With Jesus, we become people of mercy, people of peace, people who comfort and protect the weak.

This has not always been the case because the church has not always taken Christ’s words to heart. In its history, the church has been allied with the rich and the powerful of this world. The church has participated in nationalism and colonialism in its past. At times the church has forgotten Christ’s invitation to follow him alone and serve others in this world.

Paul writes of this in today’s epistle reading, “*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.*” This is the beginning of Paul’s theology of the cross in which he proclaims that the foolishness of Christ crucified is wiser than human wisdom and stronger than human strength.

Jesus reveals the suffering God crucified for all humanity. The common wisdom of the world continues to be that strong leaders send others off to war to take what is not theirs. In this world the strong continue to mock and abuse the weak, rather than using their strength to lift up and protect the weakest. Jesus reveals the God hidden in suffering and who calls us to work alongside of him, suffering in this world for others.

This week, as we celebrate 164 years of mission, and as we pause today for our Annual Meeting, Paul’s words about God’s wisdom remind us that to be the church is countercultural. Paul writes,

*“Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”*

In contrast to the world, the wisdom of God calls us “blessed” when we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. Blessed are you when you walk in the direction of Jesus, serving alongside of him. This is our mission as a church. The church is different than any other organization in society because it alone is called to proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block and foolishness to all of our modern and worldly sensibilities.

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* The journey with God begins in your heart; it begins with the realization that without God, we are poor and impoverished in spirit. At the end of our lives, all of the power, authority and wealth that we have possessed will no longer matter – all that will matter is if we have served alongside of Jesus.

As we celebrate 164 years in mission, Jesus comes to us again saying,

If you have been blessed with material riches, if you have been blessed with intellectual gifts, if you have been blessed with power and authority, then use these things to do justice – to lift up and to comfort the weak, to work for peace, to show compassion and mercy to the stranger. If you are strong, help the weak.

Blessed are you when you chose what is low and despised in this world, because this is where Jesus and his cross will be found.

*“Blessed are you who do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.”*

*Blessed are you. Amen.*