

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – YEAR “A”

There is a legend about St. John the Evangelist that wherever he traveled his message was always short and sweet and the same. Into every group he would simply say, “Love one another!” Finally, after hearing this message over and over again, one of his followers asked, “Excuse me, but don’t you have anything else to say except love one another?” St. John responded by saying, “Do that alone, and it is enough.”

The Gospels recount an array of messages from the lips of Jesus. And yet, it is likely that as he moved from place to place he had a favorite one that he told again and again. Today’s Gospel, in fact, just might have been Jesus’ most popular message – the famous Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus establishes the Beatitudes. Although this message is found only in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke, it remains one of the most significant teachings of Jesus. In Matthew’s version, which serves as today’s Gospel, Jesus is viewed as the new Moses, going up the mountain to present God’s people with the new Law.

This classical message of Jesus is more than just a teaching. For the Beatitudes offer a perspective that encourages and rewards people for being different as opposed to the ways of the world. What is more, this teaching promises blessings to the poor and hope to all those who seek to follow Jesus Christ.

What clearly was a popular teaching for Jesus is esteemed just as much by his followers. For example, when someone dies and the grieving family plans the funeral Mass, nine times out of ten the family chooses this very teaching for the Gospel. In the wake of this fact which has not only played out numerous times here at St. Bart’s but also previously in other parishes I have found myself asking why? Why the Beatitudes? What is so alluring about this counterculture Gospel?

In reflecting on these questions, two realities have emerged that give some deeper understanding to the pull of this Gospel.

The first reality is vulnerability. On the surface, the qualities called for with the Beatitudes such as poor in spirit, mourning, meekness, righteousness, forgiveness, purity of heart, peacemaking, and persecution render one vulnerable. Vulnerability by definition connotes openness to attack or damage. When the aforementioned qualities are brought to the real world, there definitely is the possibility of hurt. To be Christian is to live with vulnerability that ultimately leads to the cross. Even in the face of these vulnerabilities as well as many others, it is reassuring to know that as painful and unsettling as they may be, they contain “blessedness” in God’s eyes. And as a consequence, there is a natural affinity to these words.

The second attraction to this teaching of Jesus is the promise of a reward. For example, each Beatitude – as vulnerable as it is – contains a promise of something greater, namely the kingdom of heaven, comfort, love, satisfaction, mercy, seeing God face to face, and being called a child of God. And yet, there is even more as signified by Jesus’ words, “Rejoice and be glad, your reward will be great in heaven.” There’s a sense of

surprise implicit within this promise. It's like that song, "Eye has not seen, ear has not hear, what God has ready for those who love him."

Through the vulnerability of life it's refreshing to know that there will be a better future for those who follow Jesus. It is understandable I think why this Gospel is so popular. Not only does it serve as an outline of the Christian life, but it also points to our destiny and the belief that good always wins in the end.

So, my brothers and sisters, hang in there. Do not grow tired of doing what is right and if you feel uncomfortable, even vulnerable, it's OK, because not only are you living Christian discipleship, but you will come to know the fulfillment of Jesus' promise – therefore "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven."