

Epiphany 4A (1/29/17)
Micah 6:1-8
Psalm 15
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12

The Beatitudes are so familiar that we may hear them without recognizing the radical challenge and promise at the heart of Jesus' words. In the Beatitudes, Jesus brings good news to the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the justice seekers, the merciful, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. And this good news is a profound source of faith, hope, and love.

What a strange passage to read at a presidential inauguration. The Beatitudes are Jesus' first statements in the Sermon on the Mount, some of the most famous material in the New Testament. So, maybe it's not surprising that these lines would make their way into the time for prayer prior to the swearing-in ceremony on the steps of the Capitol. It could be that we've heard the Beatitudes so many times that we've stopped noticing what Jesus really says. Instead, we hear: *God blesses these, and God blesses these, and God blesses these, and God bless our new president, and God bless America.* If we don't pay attention, the Beatitudes may flow together into one long happy list of whomever we'd like to see blessed. But **the familiarity of the Beatitudes ought not to distract us from the radical challenge and promise at the heart of Jesus' words.**

The Beatitudes do not simply pronounce blessing on any and everyone. We'd like to imagine that we and anyone we deem worthy would be found in

God's favor, but the truth is that Jesus is very specific: Blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. This is not, in fact, an all-inclusive blessing; this is not an affirmation that, in the end, "all lives matter." Instead, **the Beatitudes take into consideration specifically those we would not normally consider "blessed," those who suffer – as a result of poverty or vulnerability, or because they pursue justice, show mercy, or work for peace in a world where injustice, cruelty, and violence are the norm.**

In this way, the Beatitudes constitute "good news to the poor,"¹ the very heart of Jesus' message. To borrow the words of one interpreter:

The Beatitudes are spoken to those groups whom God deems worthy, not by virtue of their own achievements or status in society, but because God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the forgotten, the despised, the justice seekers, the peace makers, and those persecuted because of their beliefs.²

So, to be frank, the Beatitudes don't belong anywhere near the fanfare of a presidential inauguration. What is an inauguration, after all, but a display of achievement and status? What is an inauguration but a celebration of worldly authority and influence? **By pronouncing alternative blessings, Jesus distances himself from the billionaires and dignitaries on that stage, and**

¹ Luke 4:18, Isaiah 61:1.

² Marcia Y Riggs, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 312.

takes his place instead among those on the fringes of political influence in the United States and around the world, those whose lives and work presidents can so easily obscure with the stroke of a pen.

Conventional wisdom holds that blessing in this world is reserved largely for the wealthy, the successful, and the self-serving. But as the Beatitudes ring in our ears again today, we're reminded that conventional wisdom is not divine wisdom. And, **if good news to the poor is the hallmark of Jesus' message to us, then it also informs our response to that message, inspiring us to faith, hope, and love.**

The Beatitudes serve to strengthen our faith by focusing our attention on the voice of the one who speaks them. In Jesus, we trust that the hostility and persecution and fear all around us do not have the final word, in spite of our suspicions to the contrary. **Instead, we trust that the advent of the kingdom of God sets in motion a new way of life marked by healing for the afflicted, release for the captives, and new life for those living in the valley of the shadow of death.**

The Beatitudes serve to increase our hope by boldly rejecting the cynicism that would have us settle for the ways of the world.³ "Things will always be like this; resistance is futile," the Evil One whispers in our ears, and

³ See Charles James Cook, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 312.

we retreat into whatever safe haven remains to us. But Jesus says, “No! Blessed are those who mourn, for they *will* be comforted.... Blessed are the merciful, for they *will* receive mercy.... Blessed are those who are persecuted..., for the kingdom is *theirs!*” **The struggle is far from over, and God’s dream for the world is already being realized.**

And, the Beatitudes serve to inspire our love by proclaiming that God has first loved us. God sustains us with steadfast love, goodness, and mercy – in short, blessing – even when we are weak, neglected, or despised by the world.⁴ **How else can we respond to such a singular love except to let it overflow to those around us, and especially those most in need of our solidarity?**

Dear church, if we take the Beatitudes seriously, we won’t let them wash over us again without internalizing their significance. Anyone can read them aloud, but no one can claim them without a sincere commitment to the way of human life they envision. Jesus blesses the poor, the mourners, the meek, the just, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. The question remains: Will we?

⁴ Riggs.