

The Collect for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Let Us Pray: O Lord, lead us this day into the way of Peace. Cause us to have strong and open hearts. Teach us how to find, guard, and keep the power of Love within and around all we shall do, for the sake of the One who lives in us now and forever. Amen.

Matthew 5:1-12 The Beatitudes

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 be shown 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 because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you, persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”



Sermon by Rev. Dr. Aloha Smith
Sister Josephine Bakhita 1869-1947

- Let Us Pray: O Lord, lead us this day into the way of Peace. Cause us to have strong and open hearts. Teach us how to find, guard, and keep the power of Love within and around all we shall do, for the sake of the One who lives in us now and forever. Amen.
- Today we are having a close look at Christ's Beatitudes from the "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew. There are eight of them, which many of us can recite by heart. But there is another religion with another set of eight descriptions about how to live in peace.
- According to the Buddha, the Noble Eightfold Path answers the statement of the Noble Truths of Life for all living things. Summarized, the Noble Truths state emphatically that in the world there is always inescapable suffering. It is brought about by our attachment to things and connection to relationships.
- The 8-fold path in Buddhism is a list, set of prescriptions for the correct way to live in order to avoid this attachment, finally escape the Wheel of Life, and attain Nirvana.
- But remember that in Buddhism, there is no concept of God, or Heaven. Nirvana is the state of nothing, not having to do anything, and especially, not having to be reborn into another life, usually not a person. You might have to live again, this time as a bug, a lizard, an ape, according to one's life deeds.

- There are three main categories in the eight-fold path, Ethics, Wisdom, and Meditation.
- Within Ethics, there is Right Action [behaving in a skillful way so as not to hurt anyone]
Right Speech [always tell the truth]
Right Livelihood [live in a way to not cause suffering to others]
- Within Wisdom, there is:
Right Understanding [actions have consequences]
Right Intention [resolving to understand the Buddhist path] and
- Within Meditation, there is:
Right Mindfulness [being aware of emotions of self and others]
Right Effort [putting effort into positive emotions]
Right Concentration [Developing focus for the mind]
- In the 8 Christian Beatitudes, there is a description of these right actions, efforts, intentions, and meditations with a statement of the end results, the rewards, the consequences of how we led our lives.
- Sometimes I wish the two lists could be combined, because it seems in the Beatitudes that there need to be additional instructions for each one, so we can understand more completely what they mean.
- For Buddhists, there needs to be a teacher, a dedicated community, a guide to keep on the right course.
- But in Christianity, we have the teacher, the person of Jesus, who gave, in His sayings, the whole text of the Sermon on the Mount, with examples of what he meant. (The Beatitudes are repeated with variations in the Gospel of Luke, Ch. 6).
- If you go to the place commemorated as the Mount of the Beatitudes, on the NW side of the Sea of Galilee, there is an eight-sided modern church labeled with each of the Beatitudes. It has a natural amphitheater below the hill. This valley has the mysterious property of acting as a loudspeaker to those sitting on the grass below it. If a person is speaking in a normal voice

on the top of the hill, those below on the ground can hear clearly everything that is said. This I would not have believed unless I experienced it for myself!

- Although this location is disputed still as the actual site where Jesus preached, one thing I noticed is that unlike the usual limestone rocks on the ground, which are light-colored ivory, gold, and pink. On this plain, scattered here and there, iron-rich outcroppings of black rock are strewn all through it. Maybe this is how the crowds found the place and knew where to come to hear Jesus as He taught. We'll meet you in the valley of the black rocks!
- Let us look more carefully to the sayings. First, the word "Blessed" can be a word of God's approval, or it can simply mean "Happy". This is important, because these words are not "Pie in the sky when you die", but a state of mind now, while we are living our lives and doing our work and mission here and now.
- 1. The first one, "poor in spirit", is literally someone shunned and despised as poor, is actually an inheritor of heaven, and that person knows it and can rejoice in it now.
- 2. The next one is a reassurance of love, support, and relief from pain that can be counted on. This might come in the form of a community, a person, a neighborhood, or from the conviction of the NEARNESS of God always. No matter how it comes, it should not be doubted or ignored, because God is there to provide it.
- 3. The third one is my favorite, when I learned its dynamic meaning. The translation of "meek" is unfortunate for us, because now, it generally describes someone childish, with no backbone, tame and timid, even fearful.
- The Greek is "praus"; we have the same word, "prowess", like a champion barrel rider, or a driver who is handling a hitch of eight Clydesdales, plus a carriage, in a snowstorm, downhill.
- The horse metaphor is important to remember because the word actually means, in Greek, "the ability to tame wild horses". When we visited Monty Roberts' ranch in Salinas, California "the Horse Whisperer", we understood that word.

- A rodeo bucking bronco was brought into a round ring pen, with the student trainer, armed with several lengths of clothesline, standing in the middle. The horse ran at top speed around the ring until the student with a whisk of the line, encouraged him to change direction and gallop the other way. The horse, named Jorge, was clearly frightened and angry, being in a new place with strangers. But in minutes, as we watched, Jorge cocked his inside ear toward the student and went round and round again. As he changed direction, we saw both ears turn toward the center, the signal for the trainer to change tactics. She relaxed the line and Jorge hesitated and stopped pounding the area. The trainer stood her ground. In seconds, the horse stopped running, slowed to a trot, and hesitantly walked into the center to stand right in front of the trainer. She stepped forward and gave Jorge a delicious scratch and pats on his forehead. It was done. A better translation of “meek” is “flexible”. The ability to fearlessly stand your ground at the beginning, knowing that horses are herd animals and do not like being all alone, and can switch gears and gently gratify the animal with a gracious and friendly touch.
- The merciful receiving mercy, is just sensible, but what happens to the merciless? Perhaps that is not ours to judge. After all, “Judgement is mine, says the Lord.” [Romans 12:19]
- 5. The fifth one could use some translation help, as well. If we think of purity, we might see only a baby, or a child, and that is certainly true. But the word is the same is cauterizing a wound, cleaning up an infection, pruning off a diseased branch. So that means that something unclean, not good, even dangerous, has been reformed, cleaned up, become healed and renewed, and the person knows that God has done it all. The word implies the person, knowing this, has become sincere.
- 6. The peacemakers are literally called by God and adopted into the job of reconciliation in God’s family of service.
- 7. The result could be persecution and giving the persecuted the Kingdom of Heaven. And people coming to know how to understand righteousness, peace-making and the realization of God’s justice.
- And finally, do not think you are the Lone Ranger because things are going badly for you when you are trying so hard to follow the will of God. You have Moses and Elijah and all the Saints of

Heaven in your corner.

- I close with the story of Josephine Margaret Bakhita, whose saint's day is February 8th. An enslaved woman in the Sudan, she was bought by a wealthy Italian who was building a hotel there and needed a nanny for his small daughter.

During World War II, Bakhita attended the family, who temporarily housed her and her little charge in a Christian convent in Italy. And there Bakhita fell in love with Christianity. When the parents returned to Italy, they reclaimed her to go back to the Sudan, but she did not want to leave. The case went to court, and Italian officials judged that since slavery was now abolished in the Sudan and never was legal in Italy, not only was she not enslaved, but in fact, never was, so she lived out her days until she died in 1947, and was revered for her gentleness, kindness, and good works. She was called "Our Black Mother" and "brown Sister" by the Sisters in the Convent. She is the patron saint of those who survive human trafficking.

All this and the forthcoming stories of Christian saints during this Black History Month 2023 are real and meant for our own welfare, wellbeing, and sanctification.

Stay tuned!

Amen? Amen.