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January 30, 2011

St. John's Episcopal Church
Epiphany IV/A

BLESSED ARE YOU
To want God is to know God

What is it to be blessed? The Greek word for "blessed" that Matthew uses in The Beatitudes" is "makarios". Makarios may also be mean "happy". There is a congratulatory feel to it.

Blessing is more than the cessation of suffering. Blessing is when we receive or give something that moves us towards joy and gratitude. It certainly does not require ordination! Blessing is as much about openness to grace as it is about the external action of grace.

Think of a marathon competitor on a hot day running up a hill towards the end of the race (like "Heartbreak Hill" in the Boston Marathon). Hot, dehydrated, panting, throbbing with aches and pain... someone from the cheering sidelines proffers a cup of cold water. The exhausted runner grabs the cup and throws the cool water on her face or wets her mouth with it. That's a blessing. It does not end the pain but the love and encouragement behind the cup and the water renew the heart of the runner. We do this for each other all the time, providing a little grace... to a friend or a stranger.

Matthew wrote his gospel to and for a Jewish-Christian community broken down by crushing loss and grief. The holy temple in Jerusalem had been demolished in 70 AD and Jewish culture, customs and identity were similarly pulverized. Further, many had lost their land and their dignity.

In today's gospel, Jesus looks upon the crowds and goes up to the mountain. He sits down and proceeds to teach his disciples.

The people in the crowd know what it means to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek or powerless, to hunger and thirst for righteousness. We might look with detached charity upon this distressed flock that follows Jesus with their deep needs. Where have we seen them? In Haiti, the streets of Tunis, Grand Central Station, the Mall?

Take a closer look at the people in the crowd. I think I recognize a few faces. In fact, many familiar faces come into focus, people I know. I even see your face there ... and I see my own.

Think about a time when you felt "poor in spirit", that is, sad,

depleted or spiritually impoverished. What is it to feel all but devoured by circumstances? It is hell to be stuck in the colder, nether regions of the heart. How we *yearn* for a blessing, and here it is: Jesus says, to you belongs “the kingdom of heaven.” This does not end suffering but gives meaning to it.

Imagine that Jesus looks down upon the crowd and sees a young widow. Everyone gives her more space than she wants. “Blessed are those who mourn”. There are many in the crowd whose hearts are pierced by loss, disappointment or sadness. What a blessing they could be to each other if they were to drop their stoic smiles. The cross of bereavement is lighter when shared. We know about grief, even when we don’t know exactly what it is we mourn.

In the crowd below, a young boy who has lost his parents wails desperately. A tall stranger bends down, takes him in his hands and lifts him high up so he can look for his mother and father.

“Blessed are the meek.” Why would the meek be blessed, happy? Meek here doesn’t mean tepid, wimpy or cowardly. It refers to being powerless or feeling totally helpless. The crowd that Jesus saw was politically and economically powerless. Hence their blessing is the inheritance of the land, the earth. This blessing is simple justice.

You know something of meekness if you have watched a loved one succumb to illness. Paradoxically, there is a spiritual blessing in acknowledging and accepting our weakness. The meek may inherit heaven as well as earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” The blessing here is not for those who have *attained* righteousness, but for those who hunger and thirst for it. *This* we know about, though we might not have named it that way. This is the hunger for right relationship with God and each other; the thirst for a cleansing that frees us to set things straight with each other. Those who hunger and thirst in this way will be filled with blessing. To want God is to know God. To long for God is to be close to heaven.

“Blessed are the peacemakers.” We yearn for peace and peacemakers ... amongst the warring factions in Tunis, Afghanistan, Egypt, and in the houses of our own government. We also long for a peace in our souls. We recognize the faint but persistent calls from within to mend relationships, to make peace with those who have cut themselves off or whom we have cut off or have just let drift away. There is a prodigal son or daughter in each of us; just as there is also a forgiving father or mother seeking reconciliation. To make peace

requires much courage, persistence and trust.

Henri Nouwen, writer, lecturer, priest, and teacher at Harvard and Yale, was always seeking to find out what God had in store for him next. He changed directions many times in his life, but was always guided by a deep thirst.

He was perhaps most at peace in the last part of his life when he put down roots in L'Arche, a community in which mentally handicapped people lived alongside of non-disabled folks.

As you listen to this story, I invite you to imagine that you are Janet with her purity of heart and her desire for blessing. Remember all the good and lovely things about yourself that you are so wont to disregard. Let the goodness and openness of Janet and the blessing she receives minister to you who mourn, feel powerless, or who long for right relationship. From Life of the Beloved, Nouwen writes,

“Not long ago, in my own community, I had a very personal experience of the power of a real blessing. Shortly before I started a prayer service in one of our houses, Janet, a handicapped member of our community, said to me: “Henri, can you give me a blessing?” I responded in a somewhat automatic way by tracing with my thumb the sign of the cross on her forehead. Instead of being grateful, however, she protested vehemently, “No that doesn't work. I want a *real* blessing!” I suddenly became aware of the ritualistic quality of my response to her request and said, “ Oh I am sorry ... Let me give you a real blessing when we are all together for the prayer service.”

She nodded with a smile, and I realized that something special was required of me. After the service, when about 30 people were sitting in a circle on the floor, I said, “Janet has asked me for a special blessing. She feels that she needs that now.” As I was saying this, I did not know what Janet really wanted. But Janet didn't leave me in doubt for very long. As soon as I had said, “Janet has asked me for a special blessing”, she stood up and walked toward me. I was wearing a long white robe with ample sleeves covering my hands as well as my arms.

Spontaneously, Janet put her arms around me and put her head against my chest. Without thinking, I covered her with my sleeves so that she almost vanished in the folds of my robe. As we held each other, I said, “ Janet, I want you to know that you are God's Beloved Daughter. You are precious in God's eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house and all the good things you do show us what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little

low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.”

As I said these words, Janet raised her head and looked at me; and her broad smile showed that she had really heard and received the blessing. When she returned to her place, Jane, another handicapped woman, raised her hand and said, “I want a blessing too.” She stood up and, before I knew it, had put her face against my chest. After I had spoken words of blessing to her many more of the handicapped people followed expressing the same desire to be blessed. The most touching moment, however, came when one of the assistants, a twenty-four-year old student, raised his hand and said, “And what about me?” “Sure.” I said. “Come.”

He came and as we stood before each other, I put my arms around him and said, “John, it is so good that you are here. You are God’s Beloved Son. Your presence is a joy for all of us. When things are hard and life is burdensome, always remember that you are loved with an everlasting love.” As I spoke these words, he looked at me with tears in his eyes and he said, “Thank you, thank you very much.”

In this story, the “blessed” include those who receive God’s blessing through Henri, Henri himself and the surrounding circle. We easily find ourselves in that circle as ones who give and receive blessing. And we feel known and loved.

Matthew 5:1-12

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When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴“Blessed are those who mourn,

for they will be comforted. ⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.