

# Such tiny things... ...or the fullness of blessing

God of heaven, you send the gospel to the ends of the earth and your messengers to every nation: may your Holy Spirit transform us by the good news of everlasting life in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*A Collect for Epiphany 4, Additional Collects, Common Worship, Church of England*

## THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Micah 6:1–8; 1 Corinthians 1:18–31; Matthew 5:1–12

January 29, 2017

### ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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#### THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 5:1-12

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 receive 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 for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

The 14<sup>th</sup> century English mystic, Julian of Norwich, speaks across the centuries to say: “We are never at peace in heart and soul because we seek rest in such tiny things that cannot give us rest... and we do not realize that our God

is All-Mighty, All-Wise, and All-Good. For God is true rest.”

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus, we are told, *taught* those who heard him. Hearing of this blessedness is not at all what we typically think of when we hear

about “teaching.”

Jesus was not offering a technique or an insight or an opinion. He was not giving a code of conduct.

Jesus was freely revealing the reality of God for humanity, for people then, always and now: that human beings, in the least likely or least desirable situations, are blessed.

When we look at what he is saying, in honesty, we are all one or all of those things at some time, perhaps many times in our lives. Perhaps we grow into being poor in spirit, mourning, meek (unpretentious, unassuming), hungry and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, or persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

In any case, we come to them, and we come to blessing, not because we strive for it and get it like a prize – but because this is how God is with us – and Jesus wants us to know that blessing is in it all. No need to reach for or clutch with tight fists to the “tiny things” that Dame Julian speaks about....

But speaking of mystics, especially on our Annual Meeting day, when we may have our personal as well as corporate aspirations before us, and as we are one month from Lent, I want to offer an observation from Fr. Richard Rohr that is, perhaps, at

the heart of my hopes and dreams for us as individuals, for St. Mark’s as a parish, and for the church and all people of all faiths in this time of dramatic change in all faith communities globally.

Fr. Richard initially quotes the famed 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Karl Rahner. He writes: “In the early 1960s, Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904-1984) stated that if Western Christianity did not rediscover its mystical foundations, we might as well close the doors of the churches because we had lost the primary reason for our existence. Now don’t let the word “mystic” scare you,” Father Richard writes. “It simply means *one who has moved from mere belief systems or belonging systems to actual inner experience*. All spiritual traditions at their mature levels agree that such a movement is possible, desirable, and even available to everyone.”

As we can hear in the beatitudes, Jesus is not offering a belief system and nothing in the ministry of Jesus suggests that he was signing up people for a belonging system, recruiting for a religion. His life was a revelation and an invitation of possibility for people up and down the world and across the millennia.

Are we open to actual inner experience of God, of God’s life and love, God’s compassion for the world? People of any age and any

circumstance are meant to live in this reality, this superabundance of God who is constantly fully present in us and for us and for all people and for the world.

To hear more of what Fr. Richard is saying about this authentic, genuine experience of God: “Until someone has had some level of *inner religious experience*, there is no point in asking them to follow the ethical ideals of Jesus or to really understand Christian doctrines beyond the formulaic level. In fact, moral mandates and doctrinal affirmations only become the source of deeper anxiety and more contentiousness! And then that very anxiety will usually take the form of denial, pretension, and projection of our evil elsewhere.

“You quite simply don’t have the power to obey the law or follow any ideal—such as loving others, forgiving enemies, nonviolence, or humble use of power—except *in and through union with God*. Nor do doctrines like the Trinity, the Real Presence, salvation, or the mystery of Incarnation have any meaning that actually changes your life. They are merely books on shelves. Without some inner experience of the Divine, what Bill Wilson of Alcoholics Anonymous called ‘a vital spiritual experience,’ nothing authentically new or life-giving happens.”

In summation of Fr.

Richard’s thoughts here: “Outside of *your own inner experience of this [merciful, faithful, forgiving, steadfastly loving] God*, most religion remains ritualistic, moralistic, doctrinaire, and largely unhappy; that is true on both the Right and the Left. It is the contentious religion that we see all around.”

How open are you, are we to actual experience of God? Are we ready, certainly not just at church, but anytime, all the time, living a full, aware, present experience of the sacred, the divine in our own lives, in our encounters with other people, in our engagement of the creation, in the physical movement of our bodies, in our work, our community life, in service?

A faith community like St. Mark’s can be a support and an encouragement, and also a context in which we discover new ways to practice our intention to be open to God with us, in us and among us. Laying aside the “membership in a religion” (if we haven’t already) we can, together seek and explore meaningful practices together, not because “we should” or because something is dictated by an authority, but because we are open and more and more seeking this life that is beyond tiny things – tiny things that are inundating us in media streams, in constant consumer pressure, in being driven in and through striving to attain

certain status or accomplishments that leave us empty.

This year can be a further exploration and a focus on actual experience in what we do, in the resolve of our service, our embrace of the largeness of the world around us in which God lives vibrantly and dynamically, in our own blessing and our consciousness of this blessing, all of the many forms and means of blessing provided in the unending, undying generosity of Reality, which is God.

As a closing note, recognize the free availability of the blessing Jesus reveals and recall Fr. Richard's teaching that God doesn't love us because we are good, God loves us because God is good... and, I'll add, that is never going to change. Jesus showed us once and forever that there is no more sacrificing of birds, goats, sheep, bullocks, or anything else in order to curry favor with God.

So this matter of actual experience isn't about changing God's minds about us. It is about living in the original blessing God has always and is always intending for us – individually and as a community.

We will delve into some specifics in our Annual Meeting discussion to follow this morning... embracing blessing, releasing the tiny things....



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