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Lay Preacher
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“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have a cousin that doesn't like anything. Nothing we do or say or give to her is right. I used to want to be her best friend and tried for years to be and do enough for her so that she would accept me and allow me into her heart, but eventually I just gave up trying to please her. As we got older, we grew apart and eventually lost touch for several years. Perhaps there's someone in your life who behaves similarly. “What do you *want* from me?” we want to ask them. “What can I do that will be enough for you?”

That question is echoed today in Micah: “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” Psalm 15 begins with a similar question: “Who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?” In other words, “What do you want from me? What do I have to do to earn a place in your kingdom?” But unlike my impossible-to-please cousin, unlike the people in our lives who refuse to tell us what their expectations are, God has a straightforward reply: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Wait – that's it? That's all God wants? That sounds easy!

But hang on a minute; there's more to it than that. *How* do we do those things? How do we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly? Today's Gospel reading gives a framework that we can use. Jesus tells us what we need to do and be and even promises us great rewards for doing it. “Theirs is the kingdom of heaven... they will inherit the earth... they will be called children of God.” I want to be a part of this kingdom, the kingdom full of the righteous, the peacemakers, and the merciful. It sounds so simple: do the right thing and be a good person according to what Jesus laid out in the Beatitudes, and you'll end up with vast rewards beyond anything you could ever imagine. But to be a part of this kingdom, we have to build it. As baptized Christians, each and every one of us is a kingdom-builder. There is an expectation and responsibility for us to build God's kingdom; since we are a part of it, we play a role in its creation. How do we do that?

Let's take a closer look at some of the “blesseds”.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” This is one of the most interesting parts of the Beatitudes to me because in Hebrew, “heart” refers to the center of thought, someone's *convictions*, rather than the center of emotion, which is the way we mean it now. When Jesus says that “blessed are the pure in heart”, he's saying, “blessed are those whose intentions are good and right”. Blessed is the brother who texts his siblings to remind them it's mom's birthday.

Blessed are the friends who check in with each other when times get tough and don't let anyone fall through the cracks. Blessed are the parents doing their best to raise their children to be kind, caring people. Not only will they see God, as Jesus says, but it is in them and their work that we, too, can see God.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” *Meekness* is commonly misunderstood to mean powerlessness or surrender to a greater authority. What it really means is not taking advantage of your own position of authority, to not be proud or resentful. *Meekness is not weakness*. Blessed are those who don't lord their promotion over their friends but instead accept it graciously and humbly. Blessed is the parent who anonymously sponsors another child's field trip because they are able to. Blessed is the older sister that doesn't say, “I told you so,” but instead supports her brother who is struggling. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Hunger and thirst mean something a little different to us today than it did to the people Jesus was preaching to. In his time, food and water were scarce and people often went hungry and thirsty; their need was often an urgent one, one that, if not tended to, could quickly lead to death. Today, food and water are much easier to come by. When we're hungry, we can grab an apple; when we're thirsty, we get some water out of the sink. For Jesus to say that those who *hunger and thirst* for righteousness are blessed implies the same urgency as it would with food. Their souls urgently call out for righteousness, God's Word, just as their bodies would crave food and water. Blessed are they who pursue holiness, who long for God's creation to be set right and for the injustices of the world to be no more. Blessed are they who stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, who empower the powerless and uplift the lowly. They will surely be filled.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” It seems sort of odd that those who mourn are on that list, doesn't it? We don't mourn something unless it has caused us joy, something we have loved: a job, a person you cherish. We grieve the devastations that plague us - natural disaster, human trafficking, war, disease, famine - because they show us the joy and beauty that we lack on a global scale - a healthy planet and a just world where everyone has access to enough. We mourn all these things - personal or universal - because all of it goes back to love. The Beatitudes all point toward love, because that is what we use to build God's kingdom. Jesus assures us in his sermon that even in the midst of mourning and grief, these blessings are still with us. Blessed are they who have loved and lost people dear to them. Blessed is the one who was laid off from the job he loved. Blessed is she who mourns her childhood dog. They will be comforted.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” When someone at work talks about us behind our backs or one of our kids says something that hurts our feelings, we can take that opportunity to continue on building the kingdom of God by remembering what Micah teaches us: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Instead of speaking in anger, we respond generously and with kindness. Setting aside our own sense of power and control, letting go of

our need to feel authoritative, those things are kingdom-building. Blessed are they who graciously accept an apology rather than turning away in anger, for they will receive mercy in their time.

Building a kingdom sounds like hard work, and it is, but it's not impossible. We are all called and qualified to be builders in this kingdom! None of us is too small, too weak, too foolish to be a kingdom-builder: "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." When we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly, we are growing ever stronger and more ready for the task of building up God's kingdom. Every decision we make adds another small piece to the kingdom. It's simple, but that doesn't mean it's easy.

Our processional hymn this morning said, "To the old rugged cross I will ever be true, its shame and reproach gladly bear; then He'll call me someday to my home far away, where His glory forever I'll share". God didn't pick the strongest or the bravest or the wisest to build the kingdom, he picked us. God "chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; what is weak in the world to shame the strong; what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are". He calls us each to do three simple things: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with Him, and promises us incredible rewards for doing so. When we act as kingdom-builders, we get a glimpse of that heavenly kingdom where the merciful, the mourners, the meek and the peacemakers who have gone before us all dwell alongside the Almighty. This is the way of Christ, the way of love and peace, the way of light. This is our Epiphany, this is our call. So rejoice and be glad, brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ, for our reward will be great in heaven.

Amen.