Feb 17, 2019

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
Jer 17:5-8
Ps 1:1-4, 6
1 Cor 15:12, 16-20
Luke 6:17, 20-17

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The beatitudes, as found in today’s gospel reading, have often been misunderstood and used to encourage the suffering and dispossessed to endure bravely their pitiable plights, confident that they will be highly blessed after death. Such an interpretation has also been used to exonerate others from working to alleviate the pains of those suffering or from changing the circumstances that cause it, for they might claim that those suffering are thereby closer to God. Anyone who understands these passages in such a way does not appreciate their Wisdom character, nor the way Jesus shifts it ever so slightly.

The reading from Jeremiah and the psalm response are clear examples of Wisdom teaching. They contrast two ways of living: the way of happiness or beatitude and the way of unhappiness or misfortune. This teaching suggests that good actions will lead to flourishing and evil actions will experience accountability. We all understand this teaching. Both Jeremiah and the psalmist add a religious flavor to this Wisdom teaching. They argue that authentic, wise living consists in commitment to God, which results in genuine happiness; conversely, it is foolish to turn away from God and in so doing bring on any manner of discontent or misfortune.

The beatitudes in the gospel passage are based on this Wisdom teaching. However, Jesus uses this approach to teach another message. He is not merely speaking about living in society, so the issue is not the obvious question of poverty or hunger or weeping. Nor is he referring to one’s basic commitment to God, so it is not a question of flourishing or accountability. Rather, he is talking about the hatred, exclusion, insult and denunciation people might have to face because they are his followers. He states that people could suffer precisely because they are his disciples. Here Jesus promises that if they remain faithful to him, despite the hardships this might engender, their “reward will be great in heaven.” Such a reward is not promised because they are poor or hungry or weeping or hated, but that they are faithful.
This way of reading the passage is not meant to discount the plight of those who actually suffer. These beatitudes do promise that they will be lifted up; their hunger will be satisfied; and they will be joyous. While they are promised reward in heaven, what is being promised here are all blessings that take place on earth. How are these sufferers to be blessed? It is at this point that Christian responsibility enters the picture. Those who suffer will experience God’s embrace through the loving care of other members of the body of Christ. This is the way God seems to work; this is the way the reign of God is brought forth on earth.

So, a careful reading of this gospel challenges us in at least two ways. It encourages us to remain faithful to Jesus regardless of the price that might be exacted of us. It directs us to be the instruments through which God heals our broken and struggling world.

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