

Diocesan Convention Eucharist Sermon – Br. Thomas Steffensen

The crowd had watched him go up the side of the mountain with his disciples. Perhaps he had gone up there to make sure he was seen by the masses of people. Perhaps from there his voice would carry so that all could hear what he was going to say.

They had heard about this Jesus, the one who had taken up John the Baptizer's message of "Turn back to God! The kingdom of heaven will soon be here." He had chosen disciples to follow him, men who were fisherman, common people like those who gathered to hear him now. Jesus had taught and people had listened, he had healed people and word had spread all over the region. And they had come, gathering on the mount to hear this man called Jesus speak.

Quiet settled over them as Jesus stood looking out over the crowd. Then he spoke.

"Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Happy are people who grieve, because they will be glad. Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth. Happy are people who hunger and are thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full."

I imagine those words did not illicit applause from the crowd. Maybe shock, uncomfortable shifting where they sat. I imagine that to some, these words were insulting and hurtful. Here was another person telling them how to accept their place. These were a people who were under the occupation of Rome and knew what it meant to lose hope and grieve loss, who were constantly humiliated and knew hunger and thirst.

Our experiences and our histories shape how we listen. What is also true is that despite our experiences and histories shaping how we listen, we have to keep in mind that they may also hinder us from what is truly being said.

To hear Jesus's words as telling people to be happy because they are hopeless and grieve and are humbled is to hear Jesus as sadistic, as salting the wounds of the people. But why would Jesus, the son of the God who loves us do that?

Well, my friends, he wouldn't.

If we believe that the God who loves us came to earth in the person of Jesus to be close to us and all of creation, then we can say with confidence that at the root of everything Jesus did and said is a wanting to draw closer and closer to the world. Imbedded in everything about Jesus is an invitation to participate in what he is doing. When he healed, he asked individuals to take up their mat, to go offer themselves to the temple, even to not tell anyone. It was Jesus and the one he was healing working together in the situation.

He also isn't the type of teacher to just list off everything that would be on the test. Jesus is rarely said to have been straight-forward in his teachings. He told stories, he spoke in ways that asked people to listen and question and wrestle and believe in any way that they could. This time was no exception. These teachings are invitations to participate, not only in the lesson, but in the world around us.

Great, I can hear you thinking, what does that mean? I am glad you asked.

Look at his opening statement again, "Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs." When we talk about hope we are really talking about where we place our trust. When things get bad, what or who do we believe will be there for us? For most of us, this is a complicated question. If I am honest, when things get bad, I have a tendency to put my trust in me because I have an inherent belief based on my experiences that I have to be strong and make it through.

People let me down and so I grew up taking care of myself. And as someone who has taken a vow to live in community, trust is a constant challenge. So where is the invitation in this statement? Happy are people who trust in God, for God has got your back.” It is an invitation to participate, to lean into the love of God. Now this doesn’t mean that we can just curl up and take a nap while God takes the wheel. That isn’t participation. We still have the struggle, we still have the work, we still have to go through the terror of it all, and as we trust in God, the God Who Loves Us will be there right alongside.

Happy are those who grieve because they will be glad. Where’s the invitation in that you ask? Let me offer to you something that I have learned in my life that may help. Grief and change are sisters, and they travel everywhere together. Change is the sister we recognize, whether we fear her or tolerate her or are even excited about her. Grief, however, we are often not too happy to see. The thing about Grief is that she always has something to say and she is patient. Even if she has to wait fifty years until we are ready to hear her message, she will wait. We can’t demand the message, we must be open to it, willing to accept it. Sometimes the message is the simple acknowledgement that things are different. Sometimes grief has more to say. We have to wrestle with the anger, the sorrow, the fear, the loss of what was and the loss of what will no longer be. That process is hard and painful and at the end of it we are different people. I don’t believe the gladness comes from incident or even the grieving process. I believe the gladness can happen after we make it through the process. I cannot imagine the amount of change and grief that this diocese is experiencing after the fires in Maui. God is in that process with you all may God guide you through your pain to your healing.

Happy are the people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth. Humility is a word that is often used in our tradition to keep people down, to silence them and keep them small. My favorite definition of humility was written by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. He wrote, ‘May what I do flow from me, nothing forced and nothing held back, the way it is with children’. Humility is living out of who we authentically are, nothing forced and nothing held back. When we live out of our authentic selves, we are living into the full shape of who we are. If we live out of our authentic selves, we are not comparing who we are to others but rather we are focused on living into who we are. If your natural God given gifts and desires lead you to be on stage somewhere performing to 1000s of people and that is where you feel most like you, then that is your place just as much as the person whose God given gifts and desires leads them to staying at home and singing their children to sleep. When we live into our authentic selves, we are able to live in such a way that we find our place in this life and in the way God is loving the world.

The theme for this convention is taken from the last statement we are going to look at; “Happy are those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full”. And this statement draws us in by asking what righteousness means. One way to talk about righteousness is when our life lines up with the will of God. When we live a righteous life, we are participating in the work God is doing in the world. When we hunger, when we desire, when we do what we can to enter into that invitation to participate, we will. We will because that invitation doesn’t have an expiration date. We will because the God Who Loves Us also hungers and desires for us to enter into this work with him.

If you have heard nothing else in these words I have been speaking, please hear this: you are invited to participate. You are invited to trust in a God who loves this world more than we can articulate. You are invited into the various challenges and changes ahead because that is how God is healing this world into wholeness. You are invited to be you, - fully, wonderfully, inextricably- you because it is that authentic you that God so deeply loves.

And imagine what that would look like if all of us were brave enough to hear those words and to start to live into them. Imagine what would happen if we started to answer that invitation together, participating together with God to love the world whole. There is a great myth in the church that we are doing God's work. We aren't. God is working, has always been working. And if God can speak the world into existence, I don't think God needs us to do his work for him. He doesn't need us, but he wants us the way a grandmother wants to bake cookies with the grandkids. It isn't about efficiency or production or numbers or data. It is about loving the world around us because God loves this created world more than we even understand.

Where are you being invited to participate in the work of God? In caring for these beautiful islands? In listening to the lonely? In encouraging each other? In mowing lawns? And where is this diocese invited and how will it invite others along? The people, the history, the gifts, the love of this diocese is being invited to love these islands into wholeness. God will continue to do the work, will you join him?

That day as the crowd listened to Jesus, I don't know how many people heard the revolutionary invitation that Jesus called out to them. Some surely didn't. Some probably thought he was just a spectacle. But the real miracle of that day was that some did hear him. And they answered that invitation and joined God in changing the world.