

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
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Do-Bees and the Beatitudes

I grew up in a fairly rural part of West Virginia in the 1960s and 1970s. For those of you who are a little younger, that was before cable TV, when there were only three networks and a few public TV stations. And up the hollow where my parents still live, our antenna picked up only one station. So my memories of television are limited but vivid, because we had so little of it. One of the programs I remember from when I was very small is “Romper Room.” Anyone remember “Romper Room”? It was franchised and syndicated nationwide as kindergarten on TV. If you lived in a city where a version was taped, you had a shot at being on the show. And if you lived farther away, your mother (in those days, it was almost certainly your mother) could send a letter, and Miss Jan might read your name out as a viewer at home. Somewhere in a scrapbook in my parents’ house is a postcard I got from the show, thanking me for being a “Do-Bee.” Remember the bumblebee, Mr. Do-Bee? He and his counterpart, Mr. Don’t-Bee, helped teach children how to behave toward friends and family, how to treat people right.

Anyway, that’s the first image that jumped into my mind when I read the lectionary lessons for today. Because we could describe today’s readings as Biblical “do be” lessons, snapshots of proper behavior and attitude at points in Judaic and Christian history: they tell us what we need to do and be as members of God’s kingdom.

Let’s start with the Psalm, the oldest of the texts. As we might expect given its antiquity and its source, it’s tied very closely to the law as expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures. It gives us a list of five “dos” and three “don’ts”—a mix of broad principles and specific actions—that will put us among those who may “dwell with God,” or be accepted into the congregation. We are to walk blamelessly, do right, speak the truth, honor those who fear God, and keep our oaths. We are not to do evil, demand bribes, or charge interest when we lend money to those in need. It strikes me that “do right” and “do not do evil” encompass the more specific charges; maybe those were areas where the Psalmist thought people needed more guidance or stronger reminders. Maybe they were pet peeves.

Micah comes later, roughly at the same time as Isaiah and Amos. He streamlines the ideas expressed in the Psalm, using three simple, elegant phrases to describe what is good and required by God: to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. He lists three actions that encompass all the human behavior that God requires of us. The commentators of the Oxford Study Bible point out that this single sentence sums up the requirements for three fundamental areas of ancient Jewish life: the legal, the ethical, and the covenantal (or one’s relationship with God). No wonder we find this passage from Micah quoted so often—it really ought to be all we need.

But it seems that Jesus thought his followers needed to have Micah’s message expanded again; at the start of what we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus addresses his disciples, he lays out a list of eight behaviors and attributes—eight things to do or ways to be—that mark those who are blessed. We call them the Beatitudes—a word that comes from a Latin word for “happy” that in turn is rooted in a word meaning “to bless.” But I love how we can make a Latin-

to-English pun by thinking of these as the “Be attitudes” or the way we ought to want to be. See, there’s that Do-Bee connection. I think it’s significant that Jesus doesn’t use a parable here, as we’ve come to expect; he doesn’t give a narrative example. Instead, his sentences are patterned on Jewish proverbs or the Psalms—a statement followed by a reiteration that expands or explains. He quotes the Hebrew Scriptures and then gives his own interpretation of the concept he is citing, and in doing so he lays out the character of the people of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Blessed are the poor in spirit—those who recognize they have a need for God.

Blessed are the mournful.

Blessed are the meek—those who are humble before God and man.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Blessed are those who show mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart.

Blessed are those who make peace among mankind.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for their pursuit of righteousness.

And finally, in a ninth statement, Jesus addresses his disciples directly and says “blessed are you” when you are persecuted for following Jesus.

I hear echoes of Micah in the Beatitudes—allusions to justice and kindness and humility—although Jesus’ quotations are drawn from Isaiah and other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly seem to me to express all the details of what Jesus is saying to his disciples. And it makes sense that he warns them they will be persecuted for following him, because the list of behaviors he has just laid out isn’t exactly designed to make them popular with the Roman overlords, the collaborating Jewish authorities, the Pharisees, or anyone else invested in the social order of the time. How dare he suggest that only the humble are blessed? Or that people need to hunger and thirst for righteousness, as if it didn’t exist?

This is where I see Paul fitting into today’s set of lessons. This is what he’s talking about in First Corinthians, when he says that God has chosen what is foolish, weak, low, and despised to show the glory of God’s kingdom. It’s the kind of overturning we’ve seen Jesus do again and again. In one of those coincidences that I’m sure aren’t really coincidental, I found a quote this week from Dietrich Bonhoeffer on this very thought: “God is near to lowliness; God loves the lost, the rejected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.”

Now, I said at the start that our readings are snapshots from various points in our religious history. So what are we to make of the Beatitudes for ourselves in our own day? How do they apply to us? If I can extend a metaphor a little further, how do we become Do-Bees for Christ?

We hear a lot of calls for the United States to “become” or even “return to” a Christian nation. This is certainly a misreading of history; our country was founded by seekers after religious freedom, seekers after tolerance, and those values are among the ideals expressed in our foundational documents. The leaders of the American Revolution deliberately chose to build a society in which religion was disestablished and separated from government. And I think it’s also a misreading of the intent of the Gospel and of Jesus, who deliberately refused to challenge the authorities of his time in political terms, refused to allow his followers to cast him as a

political leader aiming to overthrow the government and make himself king of an earthly realm. Instead, he said that he came to bring the Kingdom of God. His call to his disciples in the Beatitudes has nothing to do with governance and everything to do with individual behavior.

But I can imagine one form of “Christian nation” that I could get behind: what would the US look like if we aimed to practice what Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount? What would the country look like if everyone who professes to be a Christian actually lived like Christ called us to live? What would it look like if we all lived the Beatitudes? Or lived Micah’s simple three-phrase sentence? What would it look like if we were meek and humble, putting others’ needs ahead of our own? What would it look like if we acknowledged our need for God rather than trying to arrogate to ourselves the right of judgment that is God’s alone? What would it look like if we comforted those who mourn, who have experienced loss, who live in fear? What would it look like if we were merciful to others and worked to make peace among all people? What would it look like if we truly hungered and thirsted for righteousness, if we risked persecution to do the right thing? What would it look like if all of us followed Jesus in feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger and alien to our communities, reaching out to those our society makes outcasts, spreading an inclusive message of good news? What would it look like if we were willing to sacrifice ourselves for our brothers and sisters...and if we recognized that all people are our brothers and sisters?

Can you picture it? What would it look like?

It might look like the Kingdom of God. Amen.