

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A, 1.29.17

Zephaniah 2:3,3:12-13/1Cori1:26-31/

Matthew 5:1-12

THE MEASURE OF GOD'S PERFECTION

While the powerful passage listing the Beatitudes from Matthew's Gospel is a favorite scripture of many people, for a homilist this famous text presents a challenge. What can a preacher say that would anything meaningful to the wisdom of Jesus already contained in his words? Perhaps the best I can do is offer some stories that may illustrate the Beatitudes in action.



A new American doctor filled with zeal and enthusiasm for his profession tells his story about wanting to use his skills where he could do the most good. So, he decided to go Kolkata in India to work with Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity. There he met Mother Teresa and asked where he could be best put to use. She wrote something on a piece of paper, folded it in half, and handed it to him. "Take this to Sister Priscilla," she told him in her raspy voice. The young doctor took the note to the nearby "House for the Dying Destitute." He thought to himself that it was just the kind of place a doctor should be. He imagined one day changing the sign to read "House of Hope for the Living." He was going to make a difference here.

He met Sister Priscilla and handed her the note. She glanced at the contents and smiled slightly. "Follow me," she said. They walked through the men's ward, a

large open space with rows of cots cradling people in great pain who were literally skeletons with skin. *This is where I should work*, the young doctor thought. *I can make a difference here.* But Sister Priscilla continued walking and they entered the women's ward. *OK, this is where I can be useful*, he thought. But they continued into the kitchen, where a modest lunch of was being prepared. *Oh, they want to give me lunch first*, he thought.

But they continued on, walking out of the building into the back alley. Sister Priscilla pointed to a large pile of garbage that was so revolting the young doctor gagged. "We need you to take this garbage down the street to the dump" she said. "The dump is several blocks down on the right. You can't miss it." The nun handed him a shovel and two buckets. Then she was gone. The young American was stunned. Didn't they realize he was a doctor? But he dug into the pile and carried buckets of refuse to the dump. There he was amazed at the number of people swarming the area looking for something to eat or for anything of value. By the end of the day the pile was gone and he was drenched in sweat and stench. He walked back into the house to tell Sister Priscilla goodbye when he saw the sign on the doorway, written in Mother Teresa's handwriting: *You can do no great things — only small things with love.*



“My heart melted,” the doctor remembers. “It dawned on me that serving others is not about how much I know. It’s about attitude and availability to do whatever is needed — with love. I learned that shoveling garbage with love is different from just shoveling garbage.” The Gospel of the Beatitudes is grounded in such an attitude of love; true “blessedness,” heart-felt happiness and satisfaction is centered in Jesus’ perspective of humility, mercy, compassion and justice. Titles and labels don’t matter; skills and talents, wealth and material success are not the measure of faith. Jesus calls us to become a people of the Beatitudes: to embrace a spirit of humble gratitude before the God who gives, nurtures and sustains our lives, and to respond to such unfathomable love the only way we can — by returning that love to others, in whatever way we can, as a way of returning it to God.

In Brooklyn, New York, there’s a school that works with learning disabled children. Some remain there for their entire school career; others are mainstreamed into conventional schools. At a fundraising dinner, the father of one of the students gave a speech that would never be forgotten by those who attended. After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he cried out: *“Where is the perfection in my son Timmy?” Everything God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is God’s perfection?”* The audience was shocked by the question, pained by the father’s anguish and stilled by the piercing questions.

“I believe,” the father answered, “that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that he seeks is in the way people react to this child.” And he told this story about his son Timmy: One

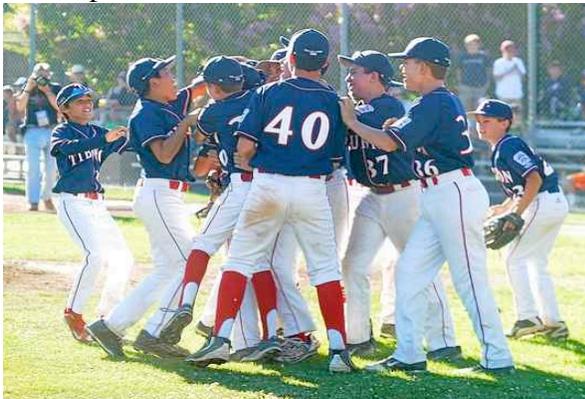
afternoon Timmy and his dad walked past a park where some boys Timmy knew were playing baseball. Timmy asked: “Do you think they’ll let me play?” Tim’s father knew that his son was not at all athletic and that most boys wouldn’t want him on their team. But Tim’s father understood that if his son was chosen to play it would give him such a sense of belonging and acceptance. Timmy’s father approached one of the boys in the field and asked if his son could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he took matters into his own hands and said, “We’re losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team; we’ll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning.”

Timmy’s father was ecstatic as his son smiled broadly. Timmy was told to put on a glove and go out to play short center field. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Timmy’s team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Timmy’s team scored again. Now with two outs and bases loaded, and the potential winning run on base, Timmy was scheduled to be up. Would the team actually let Timmy bat at this point and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly, Timmy was given the bat. Everyone knew that it was all but impossible because Timmy didn’t even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it! However, as Timmy stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved a few steps to lob the ball in softly so that Timmy would at least be able to make contact. The first pitch came in and Timmy swung clumsily and missed. One of Timmy’s team-mates came up to him and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher, waiting for the next pitch. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Timmy. As the pitch came in, Timmy and his teammate swung and together they hit a slow ground

ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the ball and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Timmy would have been out and the game would have ended. Instead the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field, far beyond the reach of the first baseman. Everyone started yelling: "Timmy, run to first, run to first!"

Timmy scampered along the baseline, wide-eyed and startled. By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman who would tag out Timmy. But the right fielder understood what the pitcher's intentions were, so he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head. Everyone yelled: "Run to second, run to second." Timmy ran toward second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases toward home. As Timmy reached second, the opposing shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base and shouted, "Run to third." As Timmy rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Timmy, run home!" He ran home, stepped on home plate, and all eighteen boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him a hero. He had just hit a "grand slam" and won the game for his team. "That day," said the father, with tears now rolling down his face, "those eighteen boys reached their level of God's perfection."



Those boys broke all the rules of the game of baseball, but they lived out the rules set forth in the Beatitudes: *Blessed are the meek... Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the clean of heart... Blessed are the peacemakers. Theirs is the kingdom of God.* Like the new doctor who relinquished his pride in order to learn the lesson of humble service... like the young ball players who let go of their competition to learn what it means to cooperate... the Beatitudes turn our world upside down and inside out. Yet, in following them we will find ourselves standing upright before God as we strive each day to live the Beatitudes and reach our own level of God's perfection.

Fr. John Kasper, OSFS

Blessed Are the Upside Down

"Blessed are the upside down,"
 So he seems to say; But -
 Who on earth is glad to mourn?
 What blessing is conveyed?
 Likewise, poor in spirit - Who
 Is happy to be there?
 Meek folks aren't on Forbes's list,
 Such combination's rare;
 No good deed goes unpunished,
 The cynic wryly notes;
 But kingdom view is different!
 - And henceforth, faith denotes
 Not wisdom for a sampler,
 To hang upon the wall,
 But vision upside down is -
 God's vision, above all!
 The good news is God sees things
 To which we're mostly blind,
 Unless we look with Jesus,
 His heart, and soul and mind;
 Things that are not, will yet be,
 And God counts no one out;
 Each one belongs to God, and,
 Thus, blessed are you! - No doubt!

Scott L. Barton