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Epiphany 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“God’s Blessing in Flesh and Blood”
Text: Matthew 5:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Many people want to be in shape, but don’t want to exercise. Many want to be slim, but don’t want to diet and eat right. Many want to be smart, but don’t want to study. Many want to a good job, but don’t want to start at the bottom and work their way up. Many want to be rich, but don’t want to work. We want to be blessed, but don’t want to be . . . *this!* What we heard today . . .

Poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaker, persecuted, and reviled? Can’t I just be blessed without all of that?

Well, without a doubt, *we are*. Very blessed. When our biggest complaint is not having the latest and greatest electronic device, when our biggest concern is not *whether* we’re going to eat but *where* we’re going to eat, when the only bombs we have to worry about are the ones that begin with the letter F that are spoken on TV, with closets full of clothes, garages full of cars, and bank accounts full of cash, yes, we are very blessed indeed.

Or are we? Or have all these blessings turned against us? Are we slaves to our devices, spoiled by our riches, and think of all this not as blessing and gift but what we deserve and have earned? Are we rich in the things of this world and poor in the things of God?

A lot of attention is being given to our new president’s first 100 days in office - what he will do, the agenda he will set. Well these words we heard from Jesus today, the first words of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, He spoke right at the beginning of *His* work, of His public ministry. I don’t know if it was within His first hundred days or not, but Jesus had just been baptized (His swearing into office, if you will), went out into the wilderness to be tempted for 40 days, after that gathered the twelve who would form His cabinet (OK, be His disciples), and now He speaks these words. An agenda, if you will. What will He do? *He will bless*. And how will He do it? *Like this*.

So . . . to not want to be these things: poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaker, persecuted, reviled . . . if these are who is blessed, then to not want to be these things *means I don’t want to be*

blessed? And does it mean this as well - that if Jesus wants to bless you (which He does), then He will bring these things into your life in order to do it? So to avoid these, means again, to avoid His blessing? To miss out on all that He has for us? By avoiding these things, are we really robbing ourselves when we think we are helping ourselves?

Think about that . . . And let's think about these Beatitudes in this, perhaps, slightly different way . . .

To be ***poor in spirit***; to know that we are spiritually impoverished by sin, in sin. It's easy to acknowledge that here, before God, and receive Absolution. But what about before others? Then are we so quick to repent? And if not, are we robbing ourselves of the blessing of forgiveness from them?

To ***mourn***. Ever notice that one of the times we get to see people we haven't seen for a long time is at funerals? We don't have enough time for each other in life, but our common enemy named death brings us together. *But why only then?* Maybe it is because at that moment we can no longer hide it . . . like we do when others ask us: *How are you doing?* and we fire off a quick: *I'm fine!* or *good!* when we're not really at all. When we're mourning something inside, but we're afraid or too proud to let others see it. Are we robbing ourselves of blessing, of prayer, of the communion and fellowship and comfort God has for us and wants to give us?

Meek. You might think meek people are timid, but they're not - it's just that they are bold *for others*, not for themselves. Always thinking of others and giving . . . and, according to Jesus, getting richer for it. Gaining by giving.

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Many of us hunger and thirst to be RIGHT - but rightEOUS? Not so much. But who is satisfied? The one who wants to be right, or the one who receives from God what she is not and does not have?

Merciful. Maybe God sends us people to be merciful to so that He can bless us. And so we rob ourselves when we pass up these opportunities; when we don't want to be bothered.

Pure in heart. You'll pray for that again today, after the sermon. *Create in me a clean heart - a pure heart - O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me* (Offertory, LSB p. 192-93). And so a pure heart is a heart filled with the Holy Spirit that sees God in the person of Jesus and who serves God by seeing Him in the person of our neighbor. But if our hearts cling to other things, things of this world, are we robbing ourselves of this blessing?

Peacemakers. This is kind of the flip side of being poor in spirit - being rich in forgiveness. I think we usually think of this in terms of making peace between two other

people who are having a dispute. But perhaps even more it is when we are involved in the dispute. When there is not peace between you and a coworker, you and a classmate, you and a fellow church member, you and your neighbor, you and a family member . . . To make peace, by being quick to forgive, to give the riches of forgiveness you receive here. When we don't, who is poorer? Are we robbing ourselves of blessing?

Persecuted and reviled. I don't want to be persecuted and reviled. I'll keep my mouth shut instead. I'll go along instead. But are we gaining or losing? Maybe these things are being sent to us so that Jesus can bless us . . .

With these words Jesus would open our eyes to see differently, and to see Him differently. How He will work in us, how He will work for us. This is not business as usual - Jesus has come to drain the sinful swamp of our hearts and lives with the blessing He will give to us. The blessing of Himself, His forgiveness, His Spirit, and the new life He raises us to. And so instead of being drowned in the swamp of sin, be drowned in the water of Baptism and raised to a new life. Instead of dining with the devil, dine on the Body and Blood of Jesus. Instead of being wise in the ways of the world, be filled with the wisdom of the Word of God. And in these things find His blessing.

But the blessing of God doesn't end here, but continues through those doors - the Lord of creation working through His creation, blessing others through you, and blessing you through others. And, according to these words we heard today, blessing in ways and places you don't expect. But how comforting to know that in these places, there is Jesus.

Perhaps we don't see it because we're too busy trying to climb to the top to notice that Jesus is at the bottom. And that by climbing up and over others, we're climbing away from Him. For He came down, after all, from heaven. Down to us. Down to sinners. Down to the down and out. All the way down to the cross, and death, and the grave. To wherever you may be. Sometimes to pull us out of those places, but maybe at other times just to be with us in them. To be with us in them through others, and to be with others in them through us. And to bless us in both ways as only He can.

That's quite an ambitious agenda, some would say. **But He has done it**, and is continuing to do it. And so refugees from fighting in the Middle East are surging into Europe, and now there are churches bursting at the seams with new Christians. Science that insists on godless evolution keeps discovering more and more evidence of a creator. Kind and joyful, hopeful and forgiving words *stand out even more* in a hostile and cynical world. And for you, what is happening in your life? To drive you to prayer, to drive you to the Word, to change your thinking and the way you were going? To bless you . . .

St. Paul said it this way today:

For consider your calling, brothers: . . .

and sisters, too! Your places in life. As a spouse, a parent, a child, a boss, a worker, a classmate, a teacher, a friend, a neighbor . . . Consider your calling . . .

not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

God doesn't always choose the people we would choose.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Because it's all His work, after all.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

I think we take that for granted, as obvious. But in the first century it wasn't at all. That Jesus the illegitimate child, Jesus the troublemaker, Jesus the friend of tax collectors, lepers, and prostitutes, Jesus the crucified *is God in the flesh*. Come to give us life by taking our death. To make us righteous by becoming our sin. To make us holy by coming into our filth. To redeem us with the only payment that could do it - *His own blood*. That was a new way of thinking . . .

Therefore, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Boast in the one who did all that for us.

But here's the question: *how do we do that?* Well how about this? How could we better boast, how could we better show and tell how great our Lord is than by . . . being quick to repent, being weak in our mourning and sorrow, being bold in our giving, being in need of righteousness, being merciful, seeing with the eyes of faith, being quick to forgive, and rejoicing when we are persecuted and reviled for Jesus' sake.

How could we better boast in Jesus than to confess Jesus in those ways? To confess that He is greater than all these things, that He is blessing us through these things, that He is giving us all these things to help us, not to hurt us, and that these things are good. How better to boast in Jesus than to boldly be these things, and be there for others in them.

That's a pretty ambitious agenda, some would say. But Jesus has done it **for you**. You are baptized into Him and He into you. He speaks His absolution into your ears. He puts

Himself into your mouths that you be what you eat, and be nourished and fed by Him. He has done it, and is doing it. He has provided for you, and still is. And so you are blessed.

And you can be sure of this too - that *He won't stop*.
That there's always more blessing coming your way.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.