

St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

ALL SAINTS DAY

November 6, 2022

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Ever tried to go two directions at the same time? How did that work out? We can't. We cannot go north and south at the same time. We cannot go east and west at the same time. We cannot go up and down at the same time.

That is what Jesus was getting at with his disciples. We cannot do right and do wrong at the same time. We cannot live righteous lives and evil lives at the same time. Why would he have said that?

Because that is what we so often try to do. And even if we do not try, that is the sort of life we live because we are human, because we are imperfect, and because we constantly face times when our will to goodness is sabotaged by our propensity to self-indulgence.

Jesus was fully human. He fully understood the limitations of our humanity. So he came here to help, and just asked us to follow him.

That is one reason calling ourselves Christian has come to trouble me. Christian is a very freighted term in current religious and political discourse, and all the term Christian does is accord us status. Maybe it states what we believe. Maybe it states what how we think we should act. But it is a static term. That's why calling ourselves followers of Christ is more appealing...and more challenging. Because following implies action. When we embrace being a follower of Christ, we admit that we are called into motion.

We are called to be part of a movement, what our presiding bishop has labeled "the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement." And once we see ourselves as part of a movement, we understand that standing still is not an option. We better understand that life is a journey. And like any journey, it requires a reliable GPS display or at least an up-to-date Rand McNally Road Atlas. And, of course, we need a destination, which would be the vision of Christ in our headlights just ahead. Because that is who we are, followers of Christ.

That's why the beatitudes are so prominent in our tradition. They orient us to the Kingdom of God, yet to be fully realized on earth as it is in heaven. They orient us to what really matters. They draw the distinction between the alluring values of our world and culture, and the demanding way to eternal life that Jesus proclaimed.

And when we say eternal life, we take its proper meaning, not its popular meaning. Eternal life is not the afterlife; eternal life means life with God. Now, today, this minute. When we follow Jesus without diversion or detour, when we lay aside our doubts, when we set aside our distractions, we will enjoy the divine guidance and companionship, the presence of God in our lives that is eternal life.

And we will see where we are on the map or screen. We will see the direction we should be going. We will know that we are never alone, that our divinely set GPS will keep us pointed in the right direction. All we need do is avoid the dreaded instruction, "Make the next available U-turn." Or in more theological terms, "repent."

And the beatitudes do so much to set us on the right path, to maintain our orientation to the divine and the Kingdom of God. They present us with the way of Christ, who said I am the way versus the way of the world.

In the style of the great Scriptural codes of the Old Testament, Jesus sets out four blessings and four curses, all designed to create the boundaries of good and bad behavior. Blessed are the poor; woe to the rich. And make no mistake, Luke was not talking about the poor in spirit. The community he preached to likely was the middle to upper middle class of the day. He often addressed the dangers of wealth. Rich and poor were monetary, not spiritual terms for Luke. And his message was clear.

In the Kingdom of God, everyone will have enough. Dying with the most toys will get us nowhere. Sharing our toys with others will bring us blessing. When we orient ourselves to the world's values and neglect the less fortunate, we bump the guardrails of the beatitudes.

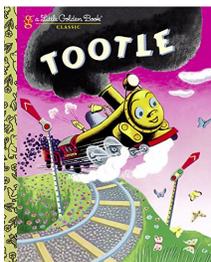
Blessed are the hungry; woe to the full. Again, Luke speaks of real physical hunger for food and sustenance. No one will be hungry in the Kingdom of God. No one should be hungry now. So if our primary concern is sating our own refined or extravagant tastes rather than filling the empty stomachs of those unable to support themselves, we again stumble off the path bounded by the beatitudes.

Blessed are those who weep; woe to those who laugh. Weeping for Luke is the province of the poor. Laughing is the haughtiness of the wealthy. But in the Kingdom of God, that laugh will be reserved to those who weep today. The poor will laugh with joy at what God is doing. And those who laugh today in their conceit will be left to mourn and weep.

Finally, Jesus warns that we are blessed when we are defamed or mistreated on account of our following Christ. But woe to us if they speak well of us. Luke reminds us that it was the false prophets who were praised, and the true prophets who were reviled and resisted. When concerns about protecting our reputations guide us, rather than safeguarding our integrity and building our character, we risk departing from the path that the beatitudes lay out.

What Jesus did in the beatitudes was show how to set our moral compass or program our GPS. He told us how we might be blessed and warned us how we might be cursed. He told us what mattered and what did not. He warned us that following him might be perilous. But promised us a great reward in heaven.

One of the first books I remember as a child is the 1945 children's classic *Tootle* by Gertrude Crampton, Tootle was a young steam locomotive who



much preferred to chase butterflies in the meadow rather than stay on the track. But Tootle also dreamed of powering the Flyer between New York and Chicago. And that required that he learn to stay on the track and resist the temptation to go off the rails.

Thanks to his engineer, who placed red flags throughout the meadow to shoo Tootle back to the track, Tootle's dream came true. Because Tootle finally learned to stay on the track no matter what.

Neither can we chase butterflies and stay on the track at the same time. Jesus said he was the way and, in the beatitudes, showed us the way. They remind us that we cannot follow Christ and succumb to the lure of earthly values at the same time. The beatitudes reveal both the red flags and the straight track. And like Tootle, we just need to stay on the track no matter what.