

From Matthew's Gospel: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Next week is the Super Bowl. You may have noticed it is New England versus Atlanta. With that in mind, I thought I would give you a little information about the enemy! It has nothing to do with football, but it does take place on West Peachtree Street.

I first became an Episcopalian, among other reasons, because of a church in Atlanta called All Saints. It was a lot like Good Shepherd, with beautiful stained glass. The music was wonderful and the preaching, most days, was very good. I heard it described as urbane and debonair, and I think that was a good description. The people, for their part, were quite debonair. Well, most, though that was as complex as the church's windows. I noticed almost immediately something about this debonair church, namely, that not everyone there was so debonair.

All Saints is downtown, by a train station. Homelessness is a problem in that area, and on any given night, you

may find ten or twenty men and women sleeping outside the church. But unlike some "debonair" churches, All Saints found a way of inviting in those people, and many of them come. And that is what I noticed when I began going there, that at this debonair church, sitting next to the CEOs of Delta and UPS, were also the city's poorest.

One day I found myself very near to one of those not-so-debonair churchgoers. I didn't notice it until the passing of the peace, because despite the genuine welcome and care of All Saints, this particular woman smelled so bad that people had left a safe barrier around her. But at the peace, people gently crossed that unseen line and offered her peace. I wish I could tell you that it was a holy experience for me, but it wasn't. I felt like everyone else was handling it more graciously than I was.

That was also the point when I realized that, despite the row and a half in between us, we would fall next to each other in the Communion line, and I began thinking about all that would mean. Maybe she was an intincter, I hoped. Maybe she just liked to dip her bread into the wine and

move on. Maybe she didn't like to kneel. You see, at All Saints, you could receive the Eucharist down front standing or at the altar kneeling, so I wondered about the chances of her being a stander, or an intincter, or both.

We made our way down the aisle, I behind her, moving in tandem, and we both passed by the Communion station down front. I thought about diverting, but I always went to the altar. I am a kneeler, and I am a sipper, and I didn't think it was right to pretend that I was a stander and a dipper. There was still some hope that she was a kneeler and a dipper, but hope was fading. We both knelt and ate the bread and she drank. Like me, she was a sipper. Just like me, a gulper, really. The Eucharistic minister then turned to me with the same debonair grace that she had shown to that woman and offered me the chalice with those words, "the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation." I realized there, for a moment, she and I were the same.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, Jesus said, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And blessed are those who mourn, and the meek, and—of course— those who hunger and

thirst for righteousness, and the merciful, and the pure of heart, and blessed are those who are persecuted for his sake, for great is their reward. Those are the Beatitudes, the blessings that Jesus spoke one day as he began to teach his disciples.

It occurs to me that that we have misunderstood the Beatitudes in the church, not their meaning but perhaps their implication. *We have heard them as prescriptive instead of descriptive.* We have taught them to our children, and the lesson seems to be that we should try to be all of these things, because there is great reward in that. But I don't think that is true. Some are virtuous, things we should try to be, but not all of them really are.

St. Paul, in I Cor. this morning, is direct about what he expects from Christians. "Let the one who boasts," Paul writes, "boast in the Lord." And Micah, in our OT reading today, is also very forthcoming about what God expects of us. "Do justice," he says, "and love kindness, and walk humbly with God." Those are prescriptive.

But by contrast, Jesus never says that anyone should try to be poor in Spirit, and he never says that anyone should want to mourn. No, instead, it is an observation about finding blessing in the difficult things of life. Or perhaps in the difficult people or places of life. The beatitudes are more about finding blessing wherever with whatever life like takes you, even on days that blessed isn't really the first word to come to mind.

Another aspect of this, we could say, is how Jesus teaches us to find blessing in the people around us. Look at how Matthew's gospel tells us that these sayings began. Jesus sat down on the side of the mountain and he looked down on all of those people. He saw everyone gathered together ... debonair and not-so-debonair. His disciples came and sat down next to him, and Matthew doesn't say that he taught the crowd, just that he taught them. I am reading this in, but one implicit point here is that Jesus was in a place where he could have looked down on them, but he didn't. He saw all of them just as they were, and he called them blessed. And the second point is also

paramount: he taught his disciples that it would be up to them to do that same thing, to see the world as he did.

The Early Christians often talked about the church like being on a boat together. The boat was the symbol of the church, because out on the water, they were all in it together. One of them reaching the other side meant all of them reaching the other side. That is why the inside of churches often look like an upside down ship. That's why where you sit is the "nave." We are in this boat together.

Maybe the modern metaphor would be an airplane. That is one place in our modern world where we are all truly bound up in the same fate. One of us getting to Paris means all of us getting to Paris. Blessed are those seated in coach, on the last row, next to the toilet, in a seat that doesn't recline for the next eight hours, because our fate is similarly sealed with theirs.

So imagine finding unexpected blessing on a plane bound for Paris. We look at everyone who will be on the plane with us. There are those in first class, some in business

class, and most of us in coach. There are the Americans and the Europeans, and a few Africans and Asians, and a few we hope don't end up sitting next to us, and others we hope will. There are those who are dressed well and others who aren't. To this Jesus says more than, *blessed are those who sit in coach, for they will have money to spend when they get to Paris*. No, as his disciples, he expects us to see humanity as he did. We have to look under the skin of each other, and find that we are all in this together, to care for each other, and how God calls us blessed. *Blessed are those who are on the last row of coach, next to the toilet for the next eight hours, because they are children of God, and we are all on this 747 together, and arriving at our final destination together is the only way any of us will get there.*

That is how Jesus saw the crowd, not wealthy, or strangers, or foreigners, or the ones stuck on the last row of coach by the toilet for eight hours, but as people loved by God. Since we are on this plane to Paris together, he says, there is something debonair about all of you. That's how the Beatitudes read in French: "debonair" are the

poor in spirit; "debonair" are those who mourn and are meek and the persecuted. So if anything is prescriptive about the Beatitudes, I suspect it is this: learn to find something blessed in everyone and everything, even in places you wouldn't think to find blessing.

So back to All Saints, that urbane and debonair church in Atlanta. Well... I drank. I drank out of the chalice that day because I had to, because I always drink and not drinking would have said something about myself—and probably about the one who taught us what it means to be blessed— that I didn't want to say. I am a kneeler and a gulper, for better or worse. But that isn't where it ends.

Through the years, I have become responsible for the chalice and blessing it. I have come to see in that common cup of wine how we are like it. We are drinking each other's happiness and sadness, and each other's blessings and problems, each other's health and illness, each other's diagnoses and remission—whether we gulp or simply dip. You might notice, if you ever look, how I

always drink out of both chalices at the altar. It isn't because I am thirsty.

The *Didiche*, which dates to the first century, also called *the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* says it this way: Like grain gathered from the field becomes one bread, so we are like this bread. Like grapes harvested and pressed into one bottle, so we are like this wine. Impossible to separate back out, offered together as a sacrifice to God.

Whoever you are and whoever I am is comingled there in Christ, and as we share in Christ, we share too in each other. And we are blessed to share in Christ with each other, in all that we are. Nothing less of course makes a church debonair.

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Amen.*