

Epiphany 4  
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A young pastor was asked by the local funeral director to hold a graveside burial service at a small local cemetery for someone who died with no family or friends. The preacher started out to this appointment, but on the way he made a wrong turn and then another and quickly got himself lost. Eventually he arrived, a half-hour late, and he saw a backhoe and its crew, but the hearse was nowhere in sight, only the workmen were there eating lunch.

Well, the diligent young pastor went over to the open grave, looked down, and saw that the vault lid was already in place. So he took out his book and began to read the service. Feeling guilty because he was so late, he preached with passion to send the deceased to the great beyond in style. And as he went on the workers took notice of what he was doing, and that only fed the fire of the preacher, to continue at length and with even more enthusiasm. He wanted to be sure that everyone near heard his message. Then after completing his service the young preacher turned toward his car, but as he went, he overheard one of the workmen commenting on what he'd just seen and heard, so the preacher couldn't help but listen in, the man said, "You know, I've been putting in septic tanks for 20 years, and I ain't never seen nothin' like that."

I would guess that after that, the young preacher learned to walk a little more humbly with his God. Sometimes it takes a bombshell like that to get us to wake up and smell the coffee, and take a look at the heart of what we do, and who we do it for.

Tom Selleck, the actor of movie and television series Magnum P.I. and Blue Blood fame, was in Hawaii filming for a show, when a nice, elderly couple approached him with a camera on the street. Selleck smiled and struck a pose for them and waited for the flash, but the man said, "No, no, we want you to take a picture of us." Selleck says that encounter changed him in many ways, and he uses that to remember not to get too full of himself.

In our lessons for today we also find people that are full of themselves. So full of themselves that they have abandoned their God. God's people have gotten off track again, so the prophet Micah makes a case for why the people of Israel should return to the God that has been so gracious to them. He explains how God has been with them. How in the time of Moses, the people had been freed from bondage, how God had continued to protect them from their enemies, and how God still loves them and desires to restore a right relationship with them today.

And in the New Testament lesson, the apostle Paul appeals to the people of Corinth not to put their trust in the wisdom of this world, but to trust in God. Because Jesus Christ crucified is a stumbling block to some and foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, Jesus Christ is precious and life-changing. The message

about the cross is the very power of God, for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

For us today, these lessons challenge us as well, because we too, are motivated by selfish things. Like the people of both the Old Testament and the New Testament we also prefer to feed the appetites of our bodies and the cravings of our egos, and at times we abandon our God too.

As Jesus went up the mountain to share his most famous teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, I'm sure he had in mind, some of these challenges we face. And as he started this glorious conversation with us he began by sharing the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. And as Jesus shares with us all those people who are so often not considered blessed or happy or fortunate, he makes it perfectly clear that no matter what the wisdom of this world may think about these people, God is with them. And that is more than enough to be considered blessed, happy, and full of joy.

The songwriter Stephen Curtiss Chapman marveled at this improbable and inexplicable joy in his album, 'For the Sake of the Call.' He writes:

What kind of joy is this  
That counts it a blessing to suffer  
What kind of joy is this  
That gives the prisoner his song  
What kind of joy could stare death in the face  
And see it as sweet victory  
This is the joy of a soul that's forgiven and free

And God is not only with us, forgiving us, and freeing us, but in Jesus' beatitudes he tells us that the best is yet to come; for the kingdom of heaven is theirs, they will be comforted, they will inherit the earth, they will receive mercy, they will see God.

The beatitudes are a comforting reminder of a God who will never abandon us, but they can also serve as a description of the way of life for Jesus' followers. When we look at the Beatitudes in this way we also discover how our selfishness can get in our way of following Jesus.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. This speaks of our need for God. But most of us believe we can make it on our own just fine.

Blessed are those who mourn. This speaks of our need to identify with the hurt, the grief and the sin of the world. But most of us are only fixed on our own self and our own hurts and grief.

Blessed are the meek. This speaks of the need for us to live God-controlled lives. But most of us are controlled by our selfish impulses and needs.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. This speaks of our need to fill our lives with God and the things of God. But most of us are simply filled with our self and projections of our self.

Blessed are those who are merciful. This speaks of our need to extend mercy to others. But most of us seek love only for ourselves and fail to extend it to others.

Blessed are the pure in heart. This speaks of our need to focus single-mindedly on God and the things of God. But for most of us allow ourselves to be pulled in all different directions, and our focus is fuzzy at best.

Blessed are the peacemakers. This speaks of our need to work for peace and justice that results in peace. Now we all are lovers of peace but we want a peaceful existence in our own lives, in which we are not bothered by the strife and brokenness in our world.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. This speaks of our need to stand for something greater than ourselves. But again, most of us only stand for ourselves.

The beatitudes like the other lessons for today are calling us to acknowledge our God and how we ought to live as the people of God. And Micah cuts to the very heart of how to do this. What does the Lord require of us? To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. That pretty much sums it up. To do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

It's pretty incredible to have a God that loves us so unconditionally and believes in us so completely that God has faith in us, that we can be like him.

May God bless you and guide you as you strive to live a Godly life. Amen.