

Blessed

When I was a pastor in Memphis years ago, there was a long-time member of our church there whose name was Noble Hicks. Noble was a really good guy, and since his family was from a small town not too far from Cool Springs, I always felt a certain kinship with Noble. He had been a high school principal but was retired by the time I knew him. One day at church after worship, he came up to me and asked how I managed to come up with something new to preach about week after week. I put my arm around his shoulders and said, "Noble, when I stand up there in the pulpit, I just look out there in the congregation at you, and I can think of all kinds of things to preach about."

Of course, I was just kidding Noble, but as my wife Allen always says, "There's a little bit of truth in every tease." In this case, there was and to this day, when I stand up here and look out over the congregation, I don't have any problem thinking of things I could preach about. Because I know all of you, at least most of you, and by now I know you pretty well, and when every single one of you comes to church on Sunday morning, you bring with you everything that's going on in your life, both things at home and at work, both good things and not so good things, and it all shows. Obviously not every single detail, but a lot of it. So much so, that I'm tempted one of these days not to prepare a sermon, come up into the pulpit, look out over all your smiling faces, and just start talking about what I see.

Actually, I suspect that's what sermons were like in the early days of the church, at a time when congregations were still quite small, small enough usually to worship in someone's house. My guess is that even Jesus did something like this on occasion, when his eye would fall on someone in the crowd, either someone he knew, or someone whose appearance that day suggested some concern, and picking up on that Jesus would speak to those concerns in his remarks that day. In fact, I think that's quite literally true of our gospel lesson today, words that are among the most familiar to us in all of scripture, words that we know as the Beatitudes, words

that I think were prompted by the people Jesus was looking at as he spoke, in this case his disciples.

A number of years ago, not long after we were married, Allen and I made a trip to Spain. It was a quite remarkable experience, and over the years, I've had occasion to mention several of the experiences we had on that trip. We flew into Barcelona, and after spending several wonderful days there, we rented a car and made our way cross country, stopping in some of the most interesting and some of the most out of the way places I've ever been. I remember in particular one small town out in the middle of nowhere where we stopped and bought a loaf of bread, a hunk of Manchego cheese, several pieces of fruit and a bottle of wine, all for the equivalent of a couple of dollars, and had the best picnic ever.

Along the way on that trip we stopped and spent several days in Toledo, a very old city which is full of interesting things to see, including an enormous gothic cathedral which is one of the architectural splendors of Spain. But it wasn't so much the architecture that I remember about that church, as it was a small room just off the sanctuary that looked like a formal meeting room. In a Presbyterian Church, it would have been the room where the Session met, and just as in the MacColl Room here, there were portraits of a number of individuals hanging on the walls.

They were not, however, portraits of former pastors of the church, as they are here, but rather paintings of the disciples, paintings all done by the same local artist. Which in this case was a good thing, since the local artist was a fellow by the name of Domenikos Theotokopoulos, though everyone in town just called him "The Greek," El Greco. Though clearly not his best work, they were still El Grecos. As I stood there and looked at those paintings, all done by the hand of El Greco, all with that same gaunt, almost haunted appearance typical of his paintings, I found myself reciting the Beatitudes. I thought of Jesus saying those words while looking at each one of his disciples in turn, all of them by now bearing signs of the struggle that their ministry together would be, and Jesus blessing each and every one of them with the promise that their efforts would not be in vain, that no matter what might come their way, great would be their reward one day.

What I'm suggesting is that these words were not just the beautiful sentiments that we associate with the Beatitudes, but very personal statements about Jesus' disciples. Which is not

to say that they wouldn't apply to anyone else, simply that Jesus on that day addressed these words to specific people, offering these words as a personal blessing to them and them in particular. I think that's important for us to consider, because these days religion for many of us has lost that personal dimension. Religion for us is all about ideas and opinions and our taking positions on certain social and political issues. It's less and less often about people, the people who sit next to us in the pews, or the people with whom we work on certain boards or committees, or those with whom we work or live. People who are dealing with all kinds of things in their lives, and upon whom we can bestow the blessing of God, just as surely as Jesus blessed his disciples.

That personal dimension was also a very important aspect of the letters of Paul, and again one that I think we very often overlook. Because Paul wrote most of his letters, and all the major ones, to churches, we tend to think of them as having been written to "the Church" in general, and not so much to specific congregations. But they were. They were written to specific congregations, none of which were anywhere nearly as large as this congregation and most of which were probably considerably smaller, small enough that they could still meet in people's homes. What is more, Paul knew them, at least most of the people in those churches, since again with the single exception of the church in Rome, all the churches to which Paul wrote letters were churches that he personally had organized, all of them places where he had spent at the very least several months with them.

So when Paul talks about problems in his letters, he doesn't name names, not because he wants to hide behind a veil of anonymity, or is being coy, but because he doesn't have to, since everyone reading that letter knows exactly whom he's talking about. While Paul deals with a number of problems in his two Corinthian letters, there's one big problem that he keeps coming back to, and that is the factions that had developed within the church which I talked about last week. Factions are a real problem in any church, but they're a huge problem in a small church, and back then all churches were small churches.

There seems to have been one faction in particular within the church at Corinth that saw itself on a very different level than everyone else in the church, a group of people who saw their faith as more mature than that of others in the church, particularly the new converts; people who saw

themselves as more powerfully spiritual than others, so spiritual in fact that they didn't think the ordinary rules applied to them; people, frankly, who thought of themselves as belonging to a higher social class than the rest of the Christians in Corinth. In other words, people who thought they were better and more important than everyone else, and apparently they didn't feel any need whatsoever to hide their feelings of superiority. In fact, they bragged about it, considering that to be an indicator of their spiritual gifts.

More than anything else, it was this attitude of superiority, this notion that I'm better than you, that Paul targets in 1 Corinthians. Now certainly what Paul has to say is perfectly applicable to other churches. That is, of course, why we still read these letters today, because we can take what Paul says here and apply it to us. Which preachers do every Sunday in churches all over the world. But the fact remains that Paul was writing to a very specific situation, involving a very specific group of people, who were acting in a very specific way. His point was not so much to chastise the faction of folks that liked to think they were so much better than everyone else (though he does chastise them), as it was to build up those in the congregation who had been put down and made to feel like they didn't count for as much as those other folks. The folks who in the eyes of the world did count for more, just as they still do today.

Which is why Paul comes back over and over again in Corinthians to the cross, reminding the Christians there that's where the wisdom of the world gets you. It leads to the cross upon which the world in its great wisdom crucified its savior and then persecuted those who tried to follow in his footsteps. Which is why we do things differently, or should do things differently, in his church, where we have a different set of values, a different set of standards by which we measure things and by which we try to live our lives. And the same is true of the blessings of God which are bestowed not upon those upon whom the world looks with favor, upon whom the world bestows its honors, but upon those who do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. And God knows who you are.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forevermore...*