

Fourth Epiphany A 2022
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Richmond, VA

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. These are the opening words of Jesus' first sermon. Up to this point in the gospel, he hadn't said more than a few sentences. He'd been busy, though. He'd been healing people and casting out demons, which caused such a stir that people came from all over Galilee and followed him here, to the side of a mountain. It's here he decides to speak, to address the crowd and reveal what is on his mind and heart.

Imagine the anticipation. This is his opening statement, his chance to lay out his vision, to tell them who he is and what he's about. And so he begins: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek. I wish there was a photograph of that moment, so we could see the faces of the crowd. Probably some of them were smiling and nodding in agreement, but I would bet that many had a look of confusion.

It is no blessing to be poor or meek, or to mourn the loss of a loved one. Often, it feels more like a curse, if that's where you find yourself. Imagine if you were in that crowd and your husband just died or you couldn't afford to put food on the table, and here's this preacher telling you what a blessing that is. Granted, Jesus is pointing to the future, promising that one day they will find strength or comfort, but still, that's little solace in the moment.

But what if we aren't hearing it quite right? What if we've lost something in translation? What if by blessed what he really meant was beloved. Beloved are the poor in spirit. Beloved are those who mourn. Beloved are the meek and those who hunger for righteousness.

Well that changes things, because now it's not so much about what those people were feeling as it is a statement about the compassion of God. Maybe Jesus was telling them that they are not abandoned or alone. Maybe he was assuring them that God sees them, each of them, through the lens of love.

Have you ever been to a 3D movie? Before you go in, they give you those special glasses. And if you try to watch without the glasses, the screen is fuzzy.

You can't make out the picture. But as soon as you put the glasses on, the characters are so real that they jump off the screen.

It's as if Jesus is putting on those glasses and looking out at the crowd. Instead of a blurry mass of humanity, he sees each person in their particularity. He sees some who are poor or sorrowful. He sees others who are meek or hungry. He sees people who are vulnerable and afraid, and he understands that what they need more than anything is to be seen and loved. I see you, he says. I see each of you as you are, and you are nothing less than God's beloved.

What makes these words so powerful is that he would soon put them into action. This sermon defines how Jesus will live. The real hallmark of his ministry will not be his miracle-making; it will be his ability to see. He will see people who others don't – the woman at the well, the lepers on the road, the paralyzed man at the side of the pool. Jesus will see each of them as God sees them, and he will name them beloved. With the words of this sermon and the actions of his life, Jesus invites us to join him and to look at the world through God's eyes.

Just as in Jesus' day, there are people all around us who are hurting or vulnerable. They're in our pews, our schools, our neighborhoods. They are the ones living on the margins, the ones we don't always see. But they're also the ones in plain sight, standing next to us and hiding pain even from themselves. Our task is to put on our glasses, and to see them – to see ourselves – as God sees. Our task is to remember that we are all beloved, and to live as though it is true. Amen.

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