

This is my first homily in Year A- The Year of Matthew.

One of my favorite authors- who I have mentioned before is Dr. Alexander Shaia, and in his book- *The Hidden Power of the Gospels*, he explores the how the New Testament was pulled together, how the 4 gospels were selected from over 50 that had been written and why the Holy Spirit was the one who must have inspired its creation.

Matthew's story is placed first in the canon although it was written after Mark's gospel story. Dr. Shaia calls Matthew the First path- Climbing the Great Mountain. He tells us that:

***“The Gospel of Matthew is a gospel of endings and new beginnings. It offered the Messianic Jews a message of hope and fresh promise. It offers the same to us.”***

It is in one word it offers us a challenge to CHANGE.

Today we read Matthew Chapter 5 and between this chapter and Matthew 25- which we will read on the last Sunday of this liturgical year in November- we have the great wisdom teachings of Jesus. These two passages serve as bookends for what we need to know if we are to be a follower of the “Way”, a disciple of Christ.

Fr. Richard Rohr calls The Sermon on the Mount Christ's inaugural- his first- address to his disciples.

Notice the language that begins the reading- Jesus goes up the mountain- just as Moses went up the mountain. Moses brought back the 10 Commandments and Jesus delivers his guide to being Happy. These are His principles for leading a fulfilled life.

Many theologians argue that the beatitudes are the very foundation of what it means to be a follower of Christ yet it is perhaps the most ignored and/or misunderstood text in the New Testament. Why do we enjoy reading the beatitudes but then ignore them?

One reason for this is that they are hard to live by.

I want to spend our time today looking at one of the beatitudes- the first:

***Happy (I like happy as a translation vs. blessed) are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.***

Fr. Rohr suggests that understanding this first beatitude in Matthew a key to everything else Jesus teaches.

But many of us- me included- have little to no idea of what Jesus meant when he said these first words of his public teaching ministry. – ***Happy are the poor in spirit.***

Just last night for example I was talking to a young lady about my struggles with this verse and she confidently looked at me and said:

***“I have visited countries where the people are poor (like in Luke’s take on this) but I can tell you the people in Canada are definitely poor in Spirit”. She did not mean if as a complement.”***

In other word she had interpreted the teaching in a way that implies that if a person is Poor in Spirit they actually are lacking in spirit when in truth Jesus meant the exact opposite.

On my blog this week I tried to make sense of what this beatitude means and I attempted to explain it by contrasting two celebrities- one of whom is definitely NOT poor in Spirit and another who outwardly lives his life in a way that I believe would make Jesus smile.

First we have young Lindsay Lohan.

Lindsay was gifted with beauty and became a child model 11, she had talent and became a movie and pop signing star by 15, likely a millionaire while still a teenager and would have been able to boast of having hundreds of friends to go along with her millions of fans.

In the eyes of the world she was a phenomenal success story. It would seem she had inherited all the riches the world could offer.

However, by age 20 she is in AA and by the summer of 2009 her picture appears on the front of US Magazine with the headline

“Dumped, humiliated, broke and crying ‘everyone has turned against me- I am so alone.’”

I am not saying Lindsay is a bad person- only that she is not poor in spirit and based on her recent history she is far from happy.

Contrast this picture with that of the life of our second “celebrity”- Jean Vanier. As a young man Vanier, who came from a family of privilege, decided to devote his life to being a friend to those with intellectual disabilities.

Vanier felt led by God to invite two men, Raphael and Philippe, to leave the institutions where they resided and share their lives with him in a household in Trosly-Breuil, France. He named their home "L'Arche", which is French for "The Ark", as in [Noah's Ark](#).

Out of this invitation grew the L'Arche community which today is in 40 countries around the world with two communities here in Toronto.

Vanier for me is a person who embodies what it means to be “poor in spirit”. I encourage you to spend some time reading his books, or going on the internet to hear him speak and if you are like me you immediately recognize that he is a person of real humility.

I borrow from Fr. Rohr who says:

***“To be “poor in spirit” means to live without a need for your own rightness, or any sense of moral superiority to anyone else. It’s a free inner emptiness, with no outer need for advancing your own reputation or any opinionated one-upmanship. If you’re actually poor in spirit it won’t be long before you’re poor in other ways too. You won’t waste the rest of your life trying to get rich because you’ll know better on the inside. Inner poverty precedes and lays the foundation for a simple, non-consuming lifestyle.”***

When we are young it is hard to understand this concept. We want to be rich and famous, for many the Lindsay Lohans of the world are role models.

The lesson we often learn as life goes on is that this pursuit of ego, of wealth and material belongings often leaves us approaching the end of our lives with the question- Is this all there is?

Notice the last part of the beatitude- Jesus tells us clearly that if we can become ***Poor in Spirit*** then ***the Kingdom of Heaven is ours***.

The way this is phrased is in the present tense. The first and last beatitude are the only ones that promise an immediate reward –not in the future (i.e. shall be) and that reward is the kingdom of heaven.

That raises yet another question – one for another day – about what Jesus means by the Kingdom of Heaven?

One possible answer is captured in the words the priest says at mass when he reminds us that Jesus said to each of us:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. ”

The way to this peace- this kingdom of heaven on earth – is by becoming a person who understands and lives as one who is “Poor in Spirit.”

Just remember doing so is not easy.