



Rev. Anne Jensen – Feb 11, 2007

Epiphany 6C Jeremiah 17, Psalm 1, Luke 6 (Beatitudes)

This past week I attended a lecture by Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest who is well-known and admired as a teacher and writer. Richard’s talk was entitled “The True Self and the False Self,” a topic which didn’t appeal to me very much, but as I said, I have admired his work and wanted to hear him. Despite the title, which sounds very psychological, his talk really addressed the spiritual truth that our readings for today seek to convey. I could feel this connection as I listened, but I couldn’t articulate the connection. After the talk I went up to talk with him, and at the end I mentioned that this week’s gospel was the beatitudes from Luke and that I felt there was a connection. He threw up his hands and laughed and said, “It’s all about being!” He had talked about “doing” and “being” and this gospel is all about “being.” The proverbial light bulb went off and I could see a path between the Bible study we did on Wednesday morning and what I heard him say Thursday night. So here’s my best go at trying to open up these beautiful passages.



First of all, it is really hard to talk about the beatitudes.

We tend to read these passages as instructions for the kinds of choices we are supposed to make if we are going to keep working on our personal righteousness, on our spiritual growth, or even our collective righteousness. I invite you to see them as **DESCRIPTIVE** rather than **PRESCRIPTIVE**. These passages describe the state in which people who have had a living experience with the Holy One actually live. They live in confidence, trusting in God, accepting the reality of “what is”, and finding that God is in it. It’s about finding who we really are in God.



Richard Rohr

The problem, Richard Rohr says, “is that contemporary Westerners have a very fragile sense of their identity, much less an identity that can rest in union and

relationship with God. Objectively, of course, we are already in union with God,” he says, but we have a hard time believing it. We tend to find our identity in what we are not---I’m not like **those** people, whoever **those** people are. Or we find our identities in groups, who share a common experience, possession or even in a person. “She will make me happy, or he will take away my loneliness or this group will make me feel like I belong. These become substitutes for doing the hard work of growing up. It is much easier to belong to a group than it is to know that you belong to God.”

People who live lives centered in God don’t feel the need to build themselves up or be as defensive as they might have been earlier in life. We talk about getting centered or re-centered after having gone off on some tangent or lost our way. They experience a kind of freedom to be their own person in Christ. They are always free to obey, but they are also free to disobey the expectation of church and state. Think of St. Paul, Joan of Arc or Archbishop Tutu.

By contrast, probably the most obvious indication of non-centered people is that they are very difficult to live with. Every one of their ego-boundaries must be defended, negotiated, or worshiped: their reputation, their needs, their nation, their security, their religion, even their ball team. They convince themselves that these boundaries are all they have to worry about because they are the sum-total of their identity. You can tell if you have placed a lot of your eggs in these flimsy baskets if you are hurt or offended frequently. You can hardly hurt saints because they are living at the center.

One of the ways I express this truth is that once you know that God knows your name, that is, that you’ve had some experience of God that is just for you, a sense of your true place in God’s creation, it really doesn’t matter so much what other people think and say about you. You have found your true identity in your relationship with God. As Christians we often find this relationship to God through an experience of Jesus.

So how do we get to this place, this way of being? Well, the first thing to say is that you cannot **think** yourself to it. Rather it grasps you, and it grasps you in the midst of your life, your ordinary life. Richard says that there are two ways we get to this point: persistent prayer and suffering. The more efficient way is suffering. The reality is that you can’t get to be an adult without some experience of suffering, so we all the raw material.

Probably most of us here have some moment when we experienced the greatness of God and or own smallness, or maybe it was an experience of forgiveness, or maybe it’s the pleasure of experiencing as fully as we can, our place in creation, and it’s a sense of being most fully who we are. Or god may call your name. It’s not based on any sense of merit. It is a gift. All we need is **one** such experience. What transpires is the formation of a person who is authentically the person God calls us to be. After that you are much less interested in defending

the ego, and you see and live with a sense of connectedness to all human beings, to all creation.

How do you keep this connection going? We need two things: we need to develop practices that sustain this connection, and we need community. I don't know how many times someone has begins a conversation with me by saying, "I know this sounds crazy, but one day..." and the person starts telling me about a profound experience of God's presence. The church community is where we can share these experiences and no one is going to think we're crazy. In fact, it's in the faith community where such conversation can be shared and affirmed. And we are enriched in our own faith by hearing the stories of others.

We do some of that around here, and we could do more if we are willing to make ourselves vulnerable, and when we do perceive the vulnerability of others, we receive them gently. I have seen this here; I've seen the vestry do just this kind of sharing. I have also heard from the new rector search committee members that they have learned to share on this level.

You as a congregation actually have lived this out. Much as I appreciate the kind words many of you have offered about my ministry here, the spiritual growth and improved health of Trinity is the work of the Holy Spirit. It could happen because you were honest about the disruption and hurt that characterized the spirit of the congregation. You didn't pretend that things were just great; you were honest about your pain. You didn't pretend that things were just great; you were honest about your pain. You left room for God to move within you and to heal the wounds. You have been who you authentically are. You have changed from being anxious to eagerly looking forward. You have been blessed, you are blessed and you shall be blessed as you continue to find your center in Christ.

Living in a blessed state is not a rationalization for laziness or complacency. Nor is it resignation; we've all known people who have given up and coasted into retirement. No, this is a question of we live our lives: do we trust and delight in God like a tree planted by a stream of water, or do we trust in our own efforts? Can we be at peace where we are or are we always looking ahead to the next place? This is also not to say that our congregation is not called to grow and share the gospel with the surrounding world, but there is a difference between growing and sharing out of Christ-like grace and peace, and growing out of frantic compulsiveness. Jeremiah 17, Psalm 1 and Jesus in Luke 6 all agree that there are two ways: blessing or woe, well-watered trust or shriveled fear.

What Jesus is inviting us to experience is the rich honesty of vulnerability, the deep soil of our own human need. And what Jesus promises is the nourishment of mercy and healing that God gives to us when we are rooted in the holy.

Our scripture goes on to give us a second message. Not only are we called to recognize our own need and dependence upon god. We are called to recognize

the need and vulnerability of others—and then to offer them through our lives, the rich soil of compassion and justice.

Here I want to inject a word about the woes: woe to those who are rich, who are full, who laugh and who are praised. The reason Jesus speaks of woe is that people are usually attached to their wealth, sense of satisfaction and enjoy praise—it builds their ego. However, if you are centered in Christ, then you are free to let these attributes go—they don't define you—they don't create your identity—your identity is not rooted in God. Then your wealth, your food and your reputation become resources to be used to care for others.

The Kingdom of God has already begun; this is God's agenda. The reality described by the Beatitudes will happen, and is happening even now.

Blessedness is a joy that comes from being open to God, being fully alive and in harmony with god's ways—both in good times and in bad.

*Happy are those who delight in the Lord
They are like trees planted by streams of water,
Which yield their fruit in its season...*