

## FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | JANUARY 29, 2023

MICAH 6:1-8 | PSALM 15 | 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31 | MATTHEW 5:1-12

Maybe you've had that experience before where you're on an airplane, and you look out of the window, and you can't get over how small everything looks. Cars look like ants. Buildings look like toys. The intersection of 4 and 17 looks like a little bowl of spaghetti. And when you land at your destination and look around, you have this sense that you're just one part of this much bigger universe. But after a couple of hours, the experience wears off, and you're back to the old you.

Back in the 1980s, the author Frank White was staring out an airplane window when he had a realization. If we can have that kind of reorienting experience while stuffed into commercial, then astronauts who go to space must have an even more profound version of it. And sure enough, he found that many people who go into space have these revelatory experiences where they see the fragility of the world, the lack of national borders, the sheer size of the planet, and it changed how they lived back on the ground. And for many of them it never wore off. In a book of the same title, White described it as an "overview effect."<sup>1</sup> A new way of looking at things that puts everything in a new perspective.

Both today's epistle and gospel reading are about that kind of shift in perspective. Except instead of seeing our world from way up above, Jesus and St. Paul both want us to see how our world looks from God's promised future.

First, begin with Jesus's beatitudes. Right at the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus offers a kind of thesis statement for everything to come. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. For they will be comforted. They will inherit the earth. They will be filled.

These are groups of people who would have been considered anything but blessed. No one but the most callous or socially inept would look at someone who is grieving or mourning and say, "Wow, God has really blessed this person." So how can Jesus say they are? Well, look at the verb tenses Jesus uses here. Jesus tells us that those who are mourning, meek, poor in spirit, and thirsting for righteousness *right now*... *will be* comforted in the kingdom of heaven. The violence of our world, our indifference toward those in need, our hatred of those who differ from us, Jesus says, will be fixed, redeemed, reconciled, and made whole.

And here's where it gets interesting. Because Jesus doesn't just say that things will get better in the future. It's not just *Sit on your hands and run out the clock*. Jesus says that God's promised future actually changes the way we live *now*. That's why Jesus can look at the poor in spirit, the grieving, the vulnerable, the people who share his lot in life, and say, "You are blessed." Not just because their hurts will be healed some day in the future, but because Jesus's ministry has brought that future to our present. To be blessed simply means that your pain, your hurt, your struggles, your desire for healing and wholeness are mended in God's future, and that Jesus is present to give us a glimpse into what that future is like. This is why teaching and healing go together in Jesus's ministry.

Jesus tells us that we live not simply by our own strength or will or talents, but by the mercy of God overflowing into our lives. The people who seem to have been left behind or ignored or overlooked are actually the ones who are blessed. God's future turns the world upside down. Who is blessed? Not the

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<sup>1</sup> "Ep 107: The Overview Effect | NASA," accessed January 24, 2023, <https://www.nasa.gov/johnson/HWHAP/the-overview-effect/>.

wealthy or the well-connected or the satisfied or the up-and-coming. But the meek, the grieving, and the pure in heart.

Jesus's promise gives us a kind of "overview effect" on our own lives. You could call it a kind of beatific vision.<sup>2</sup> Our lives may be ordinary and dull and difficult and wrapped up in a million knots we can't seem to untie. And yet, our lives are also blessed because, in Jesus, God's future is here.

If Jesus wants us to understand how God's promised future changes how we see our own lives, St. Paul wants us to understand how God's future changes the way we see the lives of our neighbors. We talked briefly about 1 Corinthians a couple of weeks ago but suffice it to say that church in Corinth was a bit of a mess. They have lots of divisions. Lots of rivalries. Lots of hierarchies. And you could imagine Paul just sort of playing whack-a-mole with each problem as it pops up. Treating every problem like its own phenomenon. But he doesn't. Because from his perspective, all these problems have the same root cause.

Paul's core belief, the driving conviction that's animating his entire ministry, is that the resurrection of Jesus is God's future breaking into the present. In the resurrection of Christ, God has given us new life, and so we are all recipients of God's mercy. We receive the gifts of God's promised future.

And our identity as recipients of God's grace completely upends the way we relate to each other. Because if you ever try to put yourself above others, thinking that you've done something to deserve this grace, you're thinking too highly of yourself. Or if you try to exclude people from this community, thinking that they don't really deserve to be here, you're forgetting that, if you want to get technical about it, you really don't deserve to be here, either. This is why Paul keeps talking about boasting in today's reading. Because when you're boasting, you're living from your achievements or status or power. You're not living as a recipient.<sup>3</sup> You're not living out of God's promised future.

So Paul gives them some real talk. "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." In other words, for people who are boasting, you don't have much to be boasting about. By the standards of the world, not many of you would be called blessed. And yet, that is exactly what you are. Because in the death and resurrection of Christ, God's promised future is given to you.

So what does Paul advise? Not just to please get along or please be nice or please stop emailing me with complaints about other people in church. No, he tells them and—since we're here—us, "Consider your calling." Consider what God says about you in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Consider your life from the perspective of God's promised future. Consider yourself not as deserving or undeserving of grace, but as a recipient of God's love. And when you finish doing that, consider your neighbor's life from that same perspective.

We do that every week when we gather at Christ's meal, where God's promised future breaks into our lives. We come to Christ's table empty-handed, not boasting of our own accomplishments but ready to receive. We see one another correctly at table, freed from our own agendas, desire, and projections for our neighbors. And we are sent into the world to live as signs that God's future is here.

Consider your calling. Consider God's future. And consider the life of all creation blessed.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>2</sup> Beatitude Attitude.

<sup>3</sup> There's a good discussion of this in chapter two of Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Paul: Reflections for the Season of Lent* (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2015).