

4th Sunday
1/29/2023

THE ROAD MAP

For centuries, mountains have fascinated people with a magnetic draw whether it is to climb up them, ski down them or simply be in awe of their beauty. Mountains have also been a place for meeting God. On Mount Sinai, the Israelites received the Ten Commandment. On Mount Carmel, Elijah was victorious over the prophets of Baal. On another mountain, Jesus was transfigured. Even where there are no mountains, people have made them. Think of the pyramids in Egypt and Latin America. The altar is a type of mountain, rising from the earth that represents a meeting with the divine.

In the Gospel we find another mountain. Jesus goes up a mountain and flowing down from it we find his teaching from which we all drink, the Beatitudes. These are paradoxical promises that summarize the Christian vocation. They form a moral revolution that reverses what we expect. The Beatitudes tweaked the nose of all conventional wisdom and values of Jesus' day and of our day. They may seem backwards but instead they point out that it's we who have it backward. The Beatitudes are like facets of a diamond that let light shine through and reflect off each other. We catch glimpses of these facets in the lives of the saints and in those around us.

There's a twofold dimension to the Beatitudes: What they say about us *and* what they say about Jesus. The Beatitudes describe who we are to be as disciples of Jesus but they also describe the one who the disciples follow. The Beatitudes describe Jesus. Commenting on this, Pope Benedict XVI described the Beatitudes as, *a veiled interior biography of Jesus*, and *a road map for the Church*. We're not disciples by ourselves. The beatitudes also describe who we are to be as part of the Church. The Church is to be a community of the beatitudes. St. Therese Parish, in all its ministries, including its school and early education center, is to illustrate the beatitudes. That's a tall order and the only way we can do that is imperfectly but we're all called to do that.

Each beatitude is rich for reflection and preaching but today I would like to focus on two of them

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. What does that mean? We can understand material poverty but as we grow in the spiritual life, shouldn't we grow rich in spirit? Jesus calls blessed, the poor in spirit. Simply put, to be poor in spirit is to be dependent on God and to know it. We may have wealth, power, titles, prestige, friends, insurance or so many other things. We may use them appropriately but our ultimate dependence isn't to be in them but in God. In today's second reading St. Paul reminds the Corinthians that by worldly standards they don't have much going for them and that what they have comes from God, from Christ.

Many years ago while going through a deep, distressing and to be honest, painful struggle, I shared my experience with a priest who described what I was going through as an education in poverty of spirit—of being dependent upon God. If you stop and ponder some struggles of your own life, perhaps you can see them as an education in poverty of spirit. You could say that our entire life, is an extended education in poverty of spirit. It's been said that our worst sin isn't our human weakness or miseries but our lack of faith in the fidelity and power of God.

Someone who experienced this poverty of spirit was our own St. Therese. In the final year or more of her life, she experienced a pitch black spiritual darkness wondering if heaven itself really existed. She described it as eating the bread of sorrow. and yet she persevered insisting that even without the joy of faith, she could do works of faith. That was poverty of spirit on a deeply intense level.

Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God. Biblically, the heart isn't just an organ in the body nor is it simply the seat of the emotions but rather, it's the center of the person. If the center is clean, it's possible for the rest to be clean. It's an undivided heart. It is a heart that seeks to do that right thing for the right reason even when it's hard; a heart open to accepting instruction and moral demands. Simply put, you could describe it as a heart that seeks to love as God loves.

To be clean of heart means that we are willing to be cleansed, to be purified again and again and again. We do this through so many different ways but one privileged way is through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This purification of the heart is necessary because, Pope Benedict also noted, the organ for seeing God is the heart, in other words, not in the intellect alone but in the center of our being.

Purity of heart calls to chastity according to our state in life and that has to do with more than just abstinence. The virtue of chastity properly understood means integrity, it means to love rightly. To love people and to use things instead of the other way around. It forbids us to treat people as objects.

Looking down on other people, pride, blocks our vision. Racism, sexism, xenophobia, denying the rights of the unborn and so many other evils all block our vision.

And there's something else that can block our vision, and it's not an exaggeration to call it a pandemic, something predating Covid, it's called pornography.

It treats people as objects, abuses the gift of human sexuality, weakens and destroys marriages and family life, corrupts the young, exploits women, supports networks of evil and weakens society. It can literally become a chemical addiction. If you struggle with this, know that other men and women do as well. There are resources available to help you. –To break the silence is an act of courage and a holy moment. To seek assistance can be a sign of strength. To bring it before God's mercy in Reconciliation can help the healing.

Purity of heart ultimately calls us not to repression but to freedom, the freedom of the children of God and through encouragement, prayer, faith, hard work and often professional counseling and support, purity of heart continues to be possible.

What the disciples did on the mountain, we do today. We come and listen but we do more. We gather around the mountain of the altar that's really Mount Calvary. Here, the saving action of Jesus' death and resurrection is made present to us as we enter into that moment. Here, God is revealed us. Here, Jesus nourishes us with his Body and Blood.

Mountains hold a magnetic draw. They can be places of encounter with God. Jesus words flow down and he tells us about the Christian vocation and implicitly reveals himself. Together, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with lives of intentional faith, may we follow this road map Jesus has given to the Church. In light of the Beatitudes, through poverty of spirit and purity of heart along with the rest of the Beatitudes, may we see the light and the love of our God.