

Core Curriculum

Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13

Psalm 146

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Matthew 5:1-12a

The phrase “core curriculum” is frequently used in the field of education. It refers to the set of common classes or courses that are considered necessary for *all* students. Back when I was in school my teachers *never* talked about “core curriculum.” I would have loved for them to talk to my parents about the importance of a common set of classes necessary for education, but instead they were constantly telling my parents things like, “Tommy talks to much,” “Tommy is easily distracted,” and “Tommy is pleasant but can’t seem to stay focused.” Where was “core curriculum” when I needed it?!

This weekend, we begin our annual celebration of Catholic Schools’ Week. It is a wonderful time for us to remember the importance of our school and the blessing that it is to our parish. Christ the King Catholic School is a place where children, both Catholic and non-Catholic, from around the River Valley come to receive a great education and to receive the core curriculum of *faith*.

What is the core curriculum of our faith as Christians? It can easily be summed up in the Beatitudes. In our Gospel reading today we find a brief set of statements that get to the heart of what it means to follow Christ. The author of the Gospel of Matthew wanted to make this very clear, so we’re told that Jesus “went up the mountain,” “sat down,” and “his disciples came to him” (Matthew 5:1). This is the image of a king—the Messiah—on His throne, teaching His subjects about the Kingdom. It’s a symbolic way of telling us that the Beatitudes are extremely important and central to the kingdom of God. In order to better understand the “core curriculum” of our faith, let’s look at each of the Beatitudes.

The first beatitude in the Gospel of Matthew is about a humble disposition of the heart. “Blessed are the poor in spirit...” (Matthew 5:3a). By adding the words, “in spirit,” the author of Matthew is making the point that poverty is an internal disposition and not a financial disposition. Therefore, all who humbly remember their dependence on God, whether they are affluent or poor, will enjoy the kingdom of heaven when God’s justice is fully manifested. This beatitude is inviting each of us, then, to discern the attachments in our lives and to make sure that nothing displaces God from the center of our lives.

The best way for us to understand the second beatitude, “Blessed are they who mourn,” is to put it in the context of the parallel beatitude in the Gospel of Luke (chapter 6) and the prophecy in Isaiah (61:1-4). In this context, it is clear that this beatitude is not primarily about the mourning that comes when someone or something is lost, but rather, it is the grief that comes with economic injustice and the economic structures that cause the rich get richer and the poor to get poorer. Jesus is reminding us in this beatitude that God does not ignore the injustice of greed, but rather, the day is coming when God will comfort those who were not comforted in this life.

Matthew’s third beatitude has no parallel in the Gospel of Luke and so Scripture scholars believe that it is basically a summary on the preceding two beatitudes. Those who heard Jesus say, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land,” would have immediately recognized it as a reference to Psalm 37:11, which promised that poor farmers would eventually get their fair

share of soil. It is a further reminder that the kingdom of heaven will contain God's perfect justice.

"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). In this beatitude, the word "righteousness" means "the saving activity of God." Unlike the Gospel of Luke, Matthew's beatitude makes sure that we don't mistakenly think it is referring simply to *physical* hunger and thirst. Rather, it is clearly talking about a *desire of the heart* for God's saving work in our lives. The very first example of this beatitude that I thought of as I worked on this homily was one of our grade school students, Vivian.

Even though Vivian's parents aren't Catholic, they chose to send her to Christ the King Catholic School because they wanted her to have a great education in a caring environment. They were surprised that, in addition to these things, Vivian began to desire spiritual things. Her mother explains it, writing—

Throughout the second grade Vivian has been learning about the Seven Sacraments. When studying Baptism, Vivian became aware that this was how she would become a member of the Church. She began to express her desire to become a member of the Church and this desire quickly became more and more persistent. Her belief and love for Christ and the Church became very clear when First Reconciliation approached and she realized that she might not be participating. She expressed her concerns to her Teacher who, in a very supportive way, spoke to us.... Vivian will be fulfilling her desire for Baptism within the next few months. We are true believers in Christ the King's philosophy—"Be it known to all who enter here that Christ is the reason for this school. He is the unseen but ever present teacher in its classes. He is the model of its faculty and the inspiration of its students." Vivian has been filled with Christ and the "unseen teacher" has reached outside the walls of the school and taught a couple grownups as well."

The fifth beatitude in the Gospel of Matthew is similar to the third, in that, it does not have a parallel in the Gospel of Luke. It reflects, however, Jesus' passion for mercy, which the author of Matthew makes a point to express in numerous places. In order to understand this beatitude, we need to remember the Old Testament meaning of mercy. It was not so much an *attitude* as it was an *activity*. Additionally, we are only able to forgive others because God has first forgiven us. Therefore, the best way for us to read this beatitude might be—"Blessed are those who, having experienced God's forgiveness, are willing to forgive to others."

It might be tempting for us to get discouraged by the next beatitude, "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). If we minimize the meaning of this beatitude to refer to those who are without sin, then, none of us have any hope of seeing God. The good news, however, is that Jesus is not talking about sinlessness. Put in the context of Psalm 24 and numerous other passages in Matthew, we can see that the "clean of heart" are those whose hearts are purified of idols. This beatitude then, is not about being perfect, but being single-hearted.

The next beatitude is about those who work for peace. "Blessed are the peacemakers..." (Matthew 5:9). Like the beatitude about mercy, the peace that Jesus is referring to is not so much an *attitude* of the heart as it is an *action* in our lives. Interestingly, the beatitude does **not** say, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will live in peace." Instead, it promises that they will be called "children of God." This is fitting since children tend to understand peace as something that comes about through *building bridges*—reaching out to one another in forgiveness—whereas, adults tend to understand peace as something that comes about through *building walls* and isolating one's self. True peace is that of little children, involving community and unity.

The final two beatitudes are linked together. They form a bookend to the first beatitude by having the same blessing—the kingdom of heaven. The author of Matthew was particularly interested in putting these beatitudes in his Gospel because he had seen firsthand the persecutions that the Jewish-Christians were experiencing after the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ. These beatitudes remind us that following Christ is difficult and sometimes we are required to take very difficult stands on controversial and unpopular issues which will leave us unpopular. One of the greatest lessons we can learn as Christians and one of the greatest lessons we can teach in our school is that life is not a popularity contest; it is an invitation into faith.

This week, I invite us to spend some more time reflecting on the core curriculum of our faith—the Beatitudes. To become more familiar with them is to become more familiar with Christ. To live them more fully is to be more fully like Christ.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Read the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12a. Which one do you feel like the Lord is working on with you the most right now in your life? Talk to God (or journal a letter to Him) about your answer to that question and what it has been like for you.