

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
Zeph 2:3; 3:12-13
Ps 46, *passim*
1Cor 1:26-31
Mt 5:1-12a

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We're back in so-called "Ordinary" Time, the green season – when the liturgical calendar says it's time to wear green again. Green season is always the in-between time. The Christmas season ended a few weeks ago, and Lent won't start until the beginning of March. In between we're in Ordinary Time, the green season, when we focus on discipleship. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? And there are lots of different points and aspects for us to consider when we think about what following Jesus means.

We're also in Year A, the first year of the 3-year lectionary cycle, when we work our way through the Gospel of Matthew. Last week we heard how Jesus went about gathering his 12 apostles; in the Gospel passage we heard last Sunday Jesus started with two sets of brothers, Simon (whom Jesus would eventually call Peter, the "Rock") and Andrew, and the two sons of Zebedee, John and his brother James. Elsewhere we learn that Jesus nicknamed James and John the "Sons of Thunder," which tells you what Zebedee must have been like. So, it was all the more remarkable that as the three of them – Zebedee and James and John – were busy mending their nets, when Jesus passed by and said "Come follow me" to the two sons, they immediately upped and left Zebedee and the nets and followed Jesus. Remarkable.

Today we get our first exposure, out of the Gospel of Matthew, to Jesus's preaching. Jesus didn't say, "Listen carefully now, because I'm going to tell you the secret to happiness." No, Jesus was bolder than that. Jesus said, "I'm going to redefine happiness. You believe that riches and power and prestige will make you happy and that the more riches, the more power, and the greater prestige you have, the happier you will be." Jesus says, "Wrong! You don't know what true happiness is." "True happiness," he says, "is found in poverty, in mourning and grieving, in non-violence, in hunger and thirst, in clean living. Happiness is found not in the glory of war but in mercy and in making peace. Happiness is being scorned and ridiculed and picked on for following me." That's what Jesus says.

Jesus took the values of his time, which are pretty much the same values as our own time, and stood them on their head. It's as if he said, "All the things you're afraid of, all the things the unredeemed world would like to avoid, these are the marks of genuine happiness."

I'm not going to delve more deeply into all these Beatitudes. But for the next few minutes, let's look at just the first one. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Over 800 years ago, a young Italian playboy by the name of Francesco di Bernardone, the son of a wealthy merchant, heard these words of Jesus and took them to heart. He took the Beatitudes literally, and he took them to heart. He gave up all his earthly possessions and embraced a life of poverty, depending on the mercy and charity of others for the necessities of

life. He founded a religious community who freely chose, like him, to live in poverty. Today they are called Franciscans and that man is known as St. Francis of Assisi.

It is sometimes said that no saint is more admired than Francis of Assisi – and no saint is less emulated.

Today we have a pope who chose the name Francis, who has pretty much rejected the trappings of power and wealth and chosen to live frugally and simply. . . and who doesn't seem to be as impressed with the virtues of free-market capitalism as we are.

There are Scripture scholars today who believe that the early Christian communities, the communities out of which the four Gospels emerged, believed that wealth and the Gospel message were incompatible. And actually what in those days they would consider wealthy pretty much matches the comfortable standard of living of today's middle class. Even if that is so, it's not at all clear what we should do with that information, what we should do about it, here and now.

But a few things are clear. To be poor in spirit means we recognize that the good things we enjoy are gifts of God, which we possess temporarily, and on loan, and subject to what Pope St. John Paul II used to call a social mortgage. We may not grasp them, cling to them, or clutch at them. Our grasp must not be tight and our fingers must not be sticky. To be poor in spirit means that we do not get ahead at anybody else's expense. We don't fight for a bigger slice of the pie; we work to make the pie bigger for everybody.

Simon and Andrew and James and John walked away from their boats and their nets and their homes when Jesus called them to follow him. Their grasp wasn't tight and their fingers weren't sticky. St. Francis walked away from all the stuff his father's money could buy him, . . . and he found genuine freedom.

In the green season we look at what it means to be a follower of Jesus. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Let us hear the words of Jesus, and take them to heart. Let us each ask ourselves, in our heart of hearts, How tight is my grasp? How sticky are my fingers?