

Epiphany 4
The Revd Dave Jones

“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

In the name of God
Love Maker
Pain Bearer
Life Giver

Hi. I'm Dave Jones, a priest in the Diocese of New Jersey. My husband and I live 7.5 miles west on 513 with three rescue dogs, a feral cat and a 59-year-old Red Legged Tortoise. I'm honored to be here. I am not at all her fault, but Margaret was the priest who, in my ordination discernment process, was the intermediary between Church of the Redeemer and the Diocese.

This is a crazy wonderful week in which to get to preach. The Lectionary readings for this week are like the Born To Run album which at least I want to hear over and over again. Sorry if you hate Bruce.

This is a wonderful week, and you are all scared. “How many sermons will this guy preach? Nine beatitudes! Three other readings! How long is he going to go?”

Relax. One Beatitude, three and a half pages. I promise.

I'm not sure whether these beatitudes in Matthew are an aspiration, a consolation, a set of entrance requirements or a job description. One thing I am sure of is that in the context of the gospels we're not called to masochistic groveling and self-hatred.

The beatitudes, Mathew or Luke pop up in the Lectionary periodically. So yet again trying to conquer the Aramaic and the Greek and figure out what Jesus meant about being blessed and what he meant about being meek, I did the commonsense thing: I googled it.

And started watching puppy videos. I found a clip that will be crucial for this sermon: “pit bulls in kilts.”

I bet this has happened to you: you are on the web and mention something to someone or even just think it and somehow all the advertisements on the side try to sell you something that has to do with what you mentioned or thought about. It's a little scary. Well I was doing a last draft of a sermon for Messiah Chester and instead of pit bulls, one of those clickbait slide shows came up. The title of this one? The ten most charming small towns in New Jersey.

How did Google know? I'm not making this up.

Chester and the Beatitudes. These two points are related!

In Matthew's gospel, we're joining Jesus and his disciples at his first defining, public act and helping the people understand who they are going to become if they stay with him. Google wants us to be charming. Among many other characteristics, Jesus reminds us that we can become humble and grateful. He is certain that everything good (including living in or near the most charming little town in New Jersey) is a gift from the divine.

Mary Oliver, the poet, here's a stanza of her poem *Sometimes*. Its only four lines.
 "Instructions for living a life:
 Pay Attention
 Be Astonished
 Tell about it."

Blessed are the meek (the humble of heart) because they pay attention and are grateful. They understand that everything and everyone good is a gift and that everyone and everything good that is a gift is a gift from God.

Paying attention isn't always positively received. I was walking from behind the bank to the bagel shop on a beautiful Spring morning this last April, consciously paying attention and being astonished. One of the people I was paying attention to saw me focus and said, "What are you looking at?"

Usually, I come back with an amazingly clever retort . . . two weeks later . . . while lying in bed. I am not quick. This time I was immediate. "The Divine." I said.

"Instructions for living a life:
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The blessed know that being charming is usually never enough. We agree that he was many things, but we know that Jesus was rarely charming, right?!

I'm sure Tyre Nichols, the 29-year-old killed by police officers in Memphis this week has been in your prayers. I bid your continuing prayers for the repose of the soul of Mr. Nichols, for his mother and entire family and especially for the ministry of the Episcopal Churches in Memphis. Here's a story about being more than charming, about being one of the blessed:

Martin Luther King was murdered, shot in Memphis on April 4, 1968. A service in the Undercroft of St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral the next day was concluded with

a procession of religious leaders of all faiths to City Hall to deliver the statement they had prepared urging an end to violence. At the front of the procession was William Arthur Dimmick, dean of St Mary's Cathedral, carrying a cross that is used at St. Mary's to this day. Three days later, on Palm Sunday, Dean Dimmick preached at the Cathedral a beautiful, gentle maybe even a little charming? a sermon linking the procession of Jesus with the parade of Religious Leaders. He concluded that sermon:

I have joined a march that started long ago when a man on a donkey entered Jerusalem. Will you join this march? That through our tears we may see the new Jerusalem in Memphis, through our pain let us see the promises of God, the city where people dwell with God- and God does dwell with them in grace, love and truth. In peace and brotherhood.

And then most of the congregation walked out, never to return. There is usually a cost to being one of the blessed.

Yes. There is a courage required if one wishes to join the blessed in inheriting the earth. There is also a crucial modesty. At whatever level it emerges, everyone we're near and everything we are and everything we have comes from divine creativity – not even mostly our own efforts. Life in the most charming town, and the skills and smarts and relative affluence that brought us here may depend to a degree, a little bit, on our unique and individual intellect and initiative, but they also require the efforts of others, and the systems that undergird the social order. A town isn't charming unless someone picks up the garbage. Pay attention! All these realities are gifts we have been given. Active humility and intentional gratitude are part of being the blessed.

Once upon a time I was 19 and a counselor at Church camp. The responsibilities were assigned in a schedule that had us alternating weeks of working with kids or adolescents which were just freaking awesome and kitchen - pure mind-sucking drudgery. Adding to that bi-weekly pain was the unfortunate reality that the cook for that kitchen . . . couldn't.

In the two weeks of her employment, we became good at accidentally dropping sheet pans of inedible food. Scrubbing pots regularly required a putty knife and a hammer.

As he tells the story (we're still friends decades later), Jeff woke up on Wednesday morning of that first week, felt dread wash over him like a cold shower and decided to do something different. He walked down the hill, came into the kitchen, and yelled, "I'll do pots." Considering that he had scrubbed pots the night before and especially considering that part of this cook's early morning practice was to burn the bottom inch of the pot of oatmeal it was an inexplicable choice. Kinda Christ-like but still stupid. It wasn't until around ten that morning, but he eventually came around the corner from the pot-sink with a pot that

gleamed with silver brightness. An inch of oatmeal and ten years of tarnish gone. "I have achieved potness" he exclaimed. "The pot and I are one." This is still the season of epiphany and that was an epiphany for me. Things can become more beautiful. Realities need not always be corroded and bent.

You get it, right? In all of our relationships, we have a choice. Whether person or pot, you can look at the other and see years of tarnish or you can see brightness just below the surface. Pay Attention. Be Astonished. Achieve potness.

Not rules, relationships. There are those who are certain that for the most charming town to remain charming, some people or kinds of people must be excluded. Those people wish to decide who is ugly and who is beautiful. Who is in and who is out. Who decides and who is decided for.

The blessed continually struggle in all ways, to include. People and Pots, Animals, and attitudes. Rather than measure the externals, possessions, power, prettiness. The blessed value the inner being, their luminescence.

Instead of marginalization they work at embracement: person to person, person to pot. Rather than ignoring pain, the blessed enter into it. Moving beyond the reality that some truly are ugly or smelly or obnoxious, the blessed remember that everything and everyone is a reflection of divine beauty.

It's hard work and it's not instant. The blessed fail often. But especially at those times: recognizing their own weakness or their own failure, the blessed see in it the truest point of meeting between two of God's creations. For God reveals God's self to us most clearly and consistently at our places of deepest need.

So, people of God, as you walk down Main Street or walk into your home or walk next door for coffee in about fifteen minutes: Pay Attention. There is beauty and grace and truth and hope waiting to be revealed in all that is around you. Be astonished and be prepared to help the other become the real and beautiful self that we are all meant to be.