

SERMON

+ Fourth Sunday after Epiphany A

January 29, 2023

“When Jesus saw the crowds...”
The crowds: who they are matters
because they become the object lesson
for Jesus to teach his disciples
who are the blessed ones
in the ways of the kingdom of heaven.

The crowds are, of course, all those people
who saw and heard Jesus
as he went throughout Galilee
teaching in their synagogues
and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom,
and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

They are the ones among whom his fame spread throughout Syria,
the ones brought to him who were afflicted
with various diseases and pains –
demoniacs, epileptics, lepers, and paralytics –
and he cured them.
They are the ones who followed him from Galilee
the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.

These aren't the supermodels, the corporate execs,
the influencers, the wealthy, the celebrity.
It's not a crowd of the powerful, the wise, or those of status.
The crowds are those who come to him out of their need;
those are the ones he sees.
And he declares them,
in this beginning of his Sermon on the Mount,
to be the blessed ones.

By the nature of who they are and what they do,
they are the ones blessed by God.
These people who have come to Jesus in such need,
he declares to be the ones who are blessed.
That, of course, isn't the way we usually see it.

In our world, we usually consider the blessed ones
to be the ones with power or status or wealth,
but certainly not those whom Jesus sees in the crowd following him.
Not in our world.
But these are the ones God notices
in the kingdom of heaven.

And that's what this is about.
That's what Jesus is proclaiming
and showing by his own life:
the ways of the kingdom of heaven.

His first words of proclamation were a call to repent
because the kingdom of heaven was near.
John the Baptist proclaimed the very same word
of repentance and the coming kingdom before Jesus.
The difference is that John pointed to Jesus as he said it.
Jesus, himself, follows up those words
with a life of teaching and proclaiming,
curing and forgiving,
with mercy, kindness, and justice
that shows what that kingdom way looks like.

Those who live that kingdom way
are the ones blessed by God.

Julio Diaz is a social worker in New York.
Every night, he ends his hour-long subway commute home one stop early,
so he can eat at his favorite diner.

But one night, as he stepped off the No. 6 train
and onto a nearly empty platform,
his evening took an unexpected turn.
He was walking toward the stairs
when a teenage boy approached and pulled out a knife.

He wanted his money.
"so I just gave him my wallet
and told him, 'Here you go,'" Diaz says.

As the teen began to walk away, Diaz called out,
"Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something.
If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night,
you might as well take my coat to keep you warm."

The teen looked at him, stunned.
"He asked me, 'Why are you doing this?'"

Diaz replied: "If you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars,
then I guess you must really need the money.
I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner,
and if you want to join me ... hey, you're more than welcome."

Diaz and the teen went into the diner and sat in a booth.
As usual, everyone came by to say hi to Diaz.
"The manager comes by, the dishwashers come by,
the waiters come by," Diaz says.
"The kid was like, 'You know everybody here.
Do you own this place?'"

"No, I just eat here a lot," Diaz told the teen.
"He says, 'But you're even nice to the dishwasher.'"
Diaz replied, "Well, haven't you been taught you should be nice to everybody?"
"Yea," the teen said, "but I didn't think people actually behaved that way."

Diaz asked him what he wanted out of life.
Diaz says, "He just had almost a sad face."
The teen couldn't answer him.

When the bill arrived, Diaz told the teen,
"Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill
'cause you have my money and I can't pay for this.
So if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you."
The teen "didn't even think about it"
and returned the wallet, Diaz says.

"I gave him \$20 ... I figure maybe it'll help him. I don't know."
But Diaz says he asked for something in return —
the teen's knife —
"and he gave it to me," Diaz said.

(StoryCorps, "A Victim Treats His Mugger Right", March 28, 2008,
Produced for NPR's *Morning Edition* by Michael Garofalo:
<https://www.npr.org/2008/03/28/89164759/a-victim-treats-his-mugger-right>)

Because the kingdom way of God
is not like the ways of the world,
living that way can be risky,
and it's certainly not easy.

Who knows what a scared and desperate kid with a knife might do,
so to hand over your wallet may not be the end of it.
But to call the kid back to offer your coat as well
seems a bit over the top.

And would the butterflies in your stomach
allow you to eat anything
when you shared a booth
with a kid who just pulled a knife on you?

Diaz said, when he told his story,
"I figure, you know, if you treat people right,
you can only hope that they treat you right."

You can only hope.
It doesn't mean they always will,
and that's the risk we take
as we live in faith and hope and the ways of God's reign.
But what an impact it makes when we do.
And see, that is the blessing.

Blessed are you, Julio Diaz,
for living the kingdom way of life.
Blessed are you all
who know and live the kingdom life.