

## **2019 Convention/Friday Night Sermon**

November 1, 2019

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I want to share a story about Jesus, the beatitudes and St. Francis. Recently I spent time at the Commission on Ministry weekend retreat. I prayed during the drive asking for words to share. Upon arrival, I noticed the large and striking architecture of the retreat house - 1950s industrial design, tiled walls, and expansive halls. Our hosts were warm, loving, and faithful.

I worried about the religious order. The building was cumbersome and the maintenance probably quite expensive. It was built for a different time. After dinner, I searched for the chapel to pray. I attempted to navigate the corridors and got lost. A grandfatherly man turned the corner from a darkened hallway. He kindly asked if he could help. "Yes. I'm Daniel," I said.

He smiled, guiding me to the chapel. Near the entrance was a painting of St. Francis of Assisi. The man said, "This always speaks to me." I looked at the picture and remembered the words of Christ to Francis: "you see my house is falling down; go and repair it for me." I turned to tell him the thought, and he was gone. I sat in the chapel. Is this what I am supposed to share?

Later that night, with Francis on my mind, I noticed the readings for this evening. The beatitudes. Francis loved the beatitudes. I then opened a magazine and read about the chaplain to Pope Francis. It quoted a sermon: "As happens with certain old buildings, over the centuries, to adapt to the needs of the moment, they become filled with partitions, staircases, rooms, and closets. The time comes when we realize that all these adjustments no longer meet the current needs, but rather are an obstacle, so we must have the courage to knock them down. Return the building to the simplicity and linearity of its origins."

This was the mission that was received one day by a man who prayed before the Crucifix of San Damiano: "Go, Francis, and repair my Church." I closed the computer, and a veil was pierced between the visible and invisible worlds. On a hill by the Sea of Galilee, our Lord spoke words that changed the arc of the universe. In an old chapel, Christ spoke, and Francis responded. In a cathedral in Philadelphia, we take the next steps of our journey. There are no coincidences with God. Is the church in need of repair?

Is our church living the beatitudes? Do we have the courage to start building? What better example of blessedness and fearlessness in Christ than St. Francis. Not the Francis consigned as the sweet and soft figure. The Francis, who decreased so that Christ increased. Endured ridicule and was ostracized. Challenged the complacency, comfort, and privilege of the church.

Francis sent people out into the world in Christ's name by returning to the simplicity and linearity of its origins. Francis became the beatitudes because he embodied Christ. The power of "blessed are you." Imagine their power when they were first spoken by

Christ to the assembled crowds. When you heard them tonight, did they jar your soul in the same way?

Jesus, Francis, and the beatitudes. We attempt to tame them. The words of our Lord become enlightened philosophy, we rationalize his miracles, and his commands become mere suggestions. We have made Francis into a birdbath, and the beatitudes become biblical poetry or soft prophecy. Good political memes on Facebook. Society strips each of their shocking impact. Because if we embody Jesus, learn from Francis, and our church becomes the beatitudes, our lives and the church would require transformation. Abandoning self, power, privilege, and living as we are all blessed.

When Jesus says blessed are you, he is not talking about someone else or those people out there. He is talking to us. Each one of us is poor in some way. Perhaps materially, but often poor in spirit, mind, health, and faith. Some hunger for food and many hunger for meaning, hope, love, and life. The beatitudes sacredly declare that we all stand on level ground in the eyes of God.

From the drug addict and pusher to me as bishop. The corporate CEO to the prisoner at Graterford. The volunteer at the food pantry to the immigrant crossing the border. We are all the same, and we are not the ones to determine worthiness. This is the beauty of God's grace - blessedness. We cannot understand, much less, embody blessedness unless we know Jesus.

Not just for an hour on Sunday. Christ, in every thought, word, action, and breath. Christ within us. It begins, ends, and continues with Christ. If we embody this blessedness, the church cannot be a business or institution. Not be about power and wealth. Let us stop defining Jesus, and start encountering Jesus. To remember where it began, Jesus.

Because the Kingdom of God is not some distant place or something we build. The Kingdom of God - is Jesus Christ. It is near; right here and now. Isn't it a bit odd, the glee and wonder when the Presiding Bishop speaks about Jesus? Isn't that what we should be doing all along? Rather than seeking the latest church growth programs, fighting over liturgy, determining who belongs.

Wringing our hands over attendance and decline, let us live blessedly in Christ. If we are not proclaiming Christ and supporting one another, let us cast it aside. If we are not giving food to the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, providing shelter to those without or healing the sick, we should have no time for it or all the distracting games.

Let's stop playing church and be the church. Words are cheap substitutes for actions. The only words that matter are the Living Word. Blessedness is also our call to holiness. It is our interior life. To pray, spread the Gospel, pray always, and never forget our public and private morality. Go to Jesus because you are blessed. Go to the blessed because they are Jesus.

Now we enter into the difficulty of the beatitudes. Love all or love nothing. For many, life is not merely a series of bad choices, terrible luck, or only having a rough time. Lives are being lost. The blessed are being murdered on our streets by gun violence, killed because of the color of their skin, what they look like, who they love, or how God created them.

Suicides are of epidemic proportions, and migrants are dying seeking hope. Drugs do not discriminate by race, economics, or geographic location. Women are being abused and beaten. Just as our lives hung in the balance when Christ entered this world, we must enter into the same world. As Jesus entered into our suffering, we must enter into the suffering. The powerful don't want to hear this. This is our call because Jesus is king, Caesar is not.

Blessed are we, let us live fearlessly in Christ. If we dare to rebuild as a church of the beatitudes, no longer can we see things from the top down, we must encounter the world from the bottom up. We cannot love at a distance; we must embody God's love. The beatitudes require us to take up our crosses. For many, they carry the cross every hour and every day. Yet if we stand at the foot of the cross with them, where the cross meets the earth, love radiates outward. The Church must seek the restoration of blessed social and economic systems, so there will no longer be exclusion.

In our rebuilding, in Christ, future generations will be released from the chains of misery. God became poor, let us have the courage to become poor; the Gospel of Jesus Christ is always good news to the poor. Go to Jesus because you are blessed. Go to the blessed because they are Jesus. Diocesan family, what is Jesus saying to His church, right here and right now?

Each and every day, I see your faith, your hearts, your willingness to proclaim the Gospel. I know your love for this Church. A church of the beatitudes is one that does not long for the past, bemoan the present or fear the future. It goes out into the world fearlessly in Christ. Shouting "Blessed are you." So let us go forth proclaiming.

Blessed are:

The homeless sleeping on our streets; let us shelter them with the church;

The child being trafficked for sex in our diocese; may we have the courage to die for their release;

The elderly sitting alone just steps from the doors of our churches; may we go out and embrace them;

And the Christians throughout the world who proclaim the gospel under the threat of death; may we stand with them at all costs.

Blessed are:

The teen who faces the pressures of success, drugs, and bullying; let he/she find a place of belonging in our homes;

The lonely, the forgotten, the marginalized; may they see their blessedness in our blessedness;

The children and youth who seek a future filled with hope, joy and love; may we uplift and support their lives;  
And the families who have suffered the brutality of violence and the weight of addictions; may we carry their crosses.

Blessed are:

The struggling, and those who have to project a strong facade just to get through the day; may their struggle become our struggle;  
Those contemplating suicide and the vulnerable; may their suffering become our suffering;  
Those who are struggling to make ends meet. Wondering where food will come from and how the bills will be paid. May their worries become our worries;  
And the child who sits alone while eating lunch; let us be their companions.

Blessed are:

Those that have wealth, for they will assist in empowering our ministry; let us lock arms and go forth into a poor and hurting world;  
Those that make our beds at hotels, clean the toilets in hospitals, and empty our trash; may each encounter be one filled with their dignity;  
And those suffering from an illness and those who weep, may we enter into their suffering and cry the same tears.

Blessed are you Diocese of Pennsylvania. Blessed is the knowing that Jesus Christ is Risen and is speaking to us. A transformative message of rebuilding. A radical church of the beatitudes that the world desperately needs. What will be our response?

There is one more piece to the story of Jesus, St. Francis and the Beatitudes. At the retreat house, I found the Mother Superior and wanted to ask her who the man that guided me to the chapel was. I wanted to thank him for his kindness and for pointing out the painting. She looked at me with a bit of worry and surprise. She said, "There is no one in this building but your group."

Go to Jesus because you are blessed. Go to the blessed because they are Christ. Let us rebuild the church. Our time is now.

*(Sermon cites influences by America Magazine; Father Cantelessma; Blessed Ignacio Ellacuria; and Father James Martin)*