

Year A – 7th after Epiphany – 19 February 2017
Matthew 5: 38-48

I enjoy winter but I am more of a spring and fall kind of person. I love the sight of new flowers in spring and the crunch of coloured leaves beneath my feet in autumn. I see God's hand in the evolution of the seasons and there is so much to give thanks for in the spring after a long winter and in the fall after a hot summer. Those are just two seasons that seem to have it all for me.

Now, I appreciate winter too. The unique patterns of frost on the window; the way my breath freezes as I exhale; that crisp, clean scent of a cold and frosty morning. And as beautiful and as cozy as Monday was, all tucked up in the rectory, using the dining room table as my office desk since I couldn't even see the church let alone get into it, there was that reality to face on Tuesday morning as Rob, Dan, Dude and I went out into the sunshine to shovel and shovel and shovel ...

But something surprising occurred to me as we came in to thaw out and start working from home again. As much as I was shoveling and sweating and grumbling about how much snow was dumped on our front porch and driveway, there was an incredible sense of accomplishment and joy as more and more wood was cleaned off the porch and as walkways were cleared so that taking Dude (our dog) outside was no longer a life-threatening encounter. All that hard work made me feel good. I felt accomplished and successful. I felt like I had contributed to something and in that realization came the truth that hard work and great expectations lead to a life very much worth living.

Over the past month we have been working through the 5th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew and it has been tough. As I noted last week, these are not the words of a meek and mild shepherd, standing like a cheerleader on the sidelines encouraging us to do just that little bit more... Quite to the contrary, Jesus has been pushing us, exhorting us, demanding of us, things that we might prefer to just overlook as we journey through the Church year. There has been no immediate comfort in these Gospel selections. We are very much being educated in the call that comes upon us as adults in the faith and not just as children meandering along in the faith.

Since Dan has come to live with us he has been subjected to my constant nagging about what school and education are for. It isn't enough that if you don't have assigned homework, you don't have to open your books every night and review your notes. You have to develop a discipline of reviewing, studying, learning that goes beyond what the teacher simply states as the minimum expectation. After all, I tell him - way too much for his liking I am sure - that "when you get out in the work world your boss is not going to be okay with your doing just the bare minimum. You will be required to take some initiative." (I am sure he could quote that speech verbatim.) But I am hoping he will someday learn that by expecting more of himself, he will achieve more than he could dream.

The same rule of thumb applies to Christians as well. God didn't just send Jesus to be our Saviour so that we could put out our hand and receive salvation as a

given, as something we just deserve. No, we have been given salvation and we are indeed expected to do something with this life we have been given and saved for – we are called to respond and do more than just the bare minimum to get by as Christians.

Let's consider children as an example for a moment here.

When a child is born, we don't expect it to roll over and crawl and walk right away. We allow it to grow and get stronger and enter into each of the next stages of life. But we don't simply place a child on the floor and walk away. At the rolling over stage, we might place a toy just out of reach so that the child will want to learn how to begin to move toward that novelty. When they learn to stand, we stand back again and beckon to them to take that first step and then another and another until they are walking all by themselves. And then we teach them how to speak, how to read, how to learn, all the while celebrating how far they have come *and* encouraging them to continue to move further on.

Although it may be tempting, we never stop expecting our children to learn more and more, to continue growing and evolving, becoming more of who God created them to be. As our Diocesan Bishop says, we really should be putting ourselves in a position to learn something new every day.

We may find that we need time to rest for a moment, but we also need to guard against a "rest" becoming a permanent state when instead we are called to remain in action, moving forward.

The Christian life is like being a newborn child. We will always have something else we need to learn; a new aspect of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit that is waiting for us to delve into; a greater expectation which God has created for us but which will never be beyond our ability. Yes, it will mean hard work but what is the problem with that? Hard work leads to a sense of accomplishment and a sense of accomplishment leads to a desire to try something else, so that we might foster that sense of achievement and success again and again. We are hardwired to learn and grow and to evolve ... It is who we are as Christians and it does indeed dictate how we are called to respond to the lessons God places before us – in the world, in church, in the Bible.

Our gospel lesson this morning has put it pretty succinctly: as Christians we are called to go above and beyond, that next step further, and not because it gets us something better but because it might help those who witness our actions get something better.

Whether we care to admit it or not, as Christians in action, people who already believe and who gather here at Church for nurture, education, encouragement, and commissioning, we already have the end-state. We have already been given forgiveness of our sins, and life everlasting. We are allowed, even encouraged and expected, to live that way already – living as if the Kingdom of God were here on earth right now ... Imagine what the world would be like if each and every Christian around the world were to live in that expectation and reality beginning right now ...!

So, what we are doing here, gathered in this house of God today, is not even really about us. It is a wee bit but for the most part our being gathered here in this place is all about everyone else who isn't gathered here in this place or in places similar to this.

What Jesus has been telling us over and over and over for the past few weeks is that this is all about those who are witnessing our actions. When they see us turning the other cheek, giving up our own coat voluntarily when we see someone who wants to take it from us, going that extra mile when we have been forced to go the first mile, we cause people to stop, think and wonder ... Why would they put up the way I have treated them? What is it about their lives that they are willing to be gracious and hospitable and patient when it would be so much easier to just get angry and walk away? ... When we live our lives to the higher standard, rising ourselves to that God-given greater expectation, we don't earn anything that isn't already ours, but we do show others what is possible for them. And that is what our job is as Christians. We don't give people salvation – Jesus does that piece of work. We just introduce people to Jesus, living our lives to a higher standard so that people will look at us and ask that question: why do you do what you do? And we can respond, “well, let me tell you about my faith ...”

Earlier I mentioned how good it felt to shovel all that snow on Tuesday morning. While I was doing it I wasn't thinking about all the positive benefits that physical activity was giving me, but I did it anyway. And when I was finished I felt good and I felt empowered to do more. That is how this Christian-living thing works. Although the benefits are tremendous (both now and in eternity), we don't always remember to focus on how good it feels to do the Christian thing. We sometimes focus more on how hard it is or how weird it feels to be different than the people around us, but in the end, we feel so good. The outcomes are worth the work. And once we have started being openly Christian and all that that entails, we will find that while the expectations on us are greater and greater, so too are the outcomes we see and the growth we recognize in our own faith life.

So, as we move toward next week's Gospel of the Transfiguration and our Lenten journey, have we been challenged by the Gospel? We certainly have been. But we are up to that challenge and if we are willing to accept it then we will find that the Kingdom of God on earth just keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And we will know that we had a direct part to play in bringing that about!