



Cathedral Confirmations: June 22, 2014

The Rt. Rev. Melissa M. Skelton

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It was around 3:30 in the afternoon when nine-year-old Josie and her mother arrived for Josie's acolyte training at my tiny church in the equally tiny town called Castine, Maine. Some would have said that Josie was too young to be in acolyte training, but what I knew was that Josie had a presence that was well beyond her years.

And so the first thing I did was to give her my basic adult spiel about what it means to function upfront in worship: that it's more about a kind of calm and centered presence than it is about performing a series of actions perfectly (though nothing's wrong with doing things well). Josie listened attentively, nodding as I spoke, but fidgeting, eager to move on to *doing* what an acolyte does.

And so we began the action part of the training. I vested Josie in a small white acolyte's alb and began getting the things she would need to light the altar candles. And so we found the brass candle lighter that typically leaned near the acolyte's seat in the altar area, and we tracked down a book of matches and began to work through how to light the wick of the candle lighter.

It was then that something dawned on me.

"Josie," I asked her. "Have you ever struck a match before?"

"No" she answered, glancing at her mother as if denying some kind of wrongdoing.

"Well, let me show you what to do," I said, "and then you can give it a try."

Now when you have to teach a young person to strike a match from a matchbook, a person who has never done it before, you find out that it's a fairly complicated process.

It involves the following: Opening the book of matches, tearing the tiny match away, and closing the book by reinserting the cover; grasping the flimsy cardboard match and applying enough pressure so that when struck it will ignite, dragging the match across the rough surface of the matchbook, and lighting it, and then quickly withdrawing the fingers near the head of the matchstick in order not to get burned but doing it in a way so that one doesn't drop the matchstick.

This laborious process was what I told and showed Josie.

For her part, she listened and watched carefully. Then, she took the book of matches in her small hands that, by now, were shaking and, much to my amazement did this: She opened the book of matches, tore the match out, closed the book, grasped the match way down at the end, struck and ignited the match and then, in a flash, moved her fingers so as not to get burned but to hold the match securely once it was lit.

Together we lit the wick of the candle lighter, and we were ready to go.

This scene—Josie, the person she was, her intentionality, all that she was thinking and feeling, the way she moved into trying on her new role with those shaky little hands, all these things—have something to say to us about what we are doing here today at this Cathedral Celebration of Confirmation, Reaffirmation and Reception.

For today we are not confirming and reaffirming and receiving a group of people who all have clear heads, calm hearts and strong and capable hands for the Christian life they are publicly embracing as baptized people. No, instead, we are confirming, receiving, and reaffirming those who still have questions, those whose feelings are sometimes a jumble, those whose hands still shake as they try to hold all that already has been given them and all that will be entrusted to them in the future as Christian people.

Yes, to my mind, they (and I might add, we) are just like that little girl so many years ago: willing to do a new thing, preparing to do a new thing but not completely ready for the tasks

that would be given to her and that will be given to us. However, just like that little girl, when encouraged and surrounded by the community of the Church, just like the one gathered here today, she and we will find ourselves ready enough.

But ready enough for what? What will be the kinds of things that our newly confirmed, reaffirmed and received persons will be asked to do as a part of their Christian life?

In our Gospel for today Jesus tells us something about that. For he describes a surprising world in which those the world curses, those the world regards as foolish, are in fact blessed by God.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers.”

But these pronouncements are not just about how God regards certain people. Instead, as Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle has said, it has to do with our own “location” in Christian life. As maturing Christians what we are about more and more is both the ability to stand in our own experiences of being poor in spirit, mourning, merciful, meek, pure in heart or peaceful and the ability to stand with those who are poor in spirit, mourning, merciful, meek, pure in heart or peaceful.

And so while all you who are about to be confirmed, reaffirmed or received may not feel ready to do this, to stand as or to stand with the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the merciful, the meek, the pure in heart, the peaceful all of the rest of us, all we need do is to show up with our intentionality to do so, to show up with our shaky hands and to let the community around us carry us as we try to do these things.

And so some questions for you this evening: What are you holding in your strong but shaky hands right now? In what situation are you trying to be merciful or peaceful even though you may not feel completely ready or capable of doing so? Or this: Whom are you trying to stand with who is meek or poor in spirit though you may not feel capable of doing so? And finally: What part of this community, the community surrounding you here today, do you need to rely on, to relax into in order to be able to do these things?

Relying on, relaxing into. If we get anxious at all about living the Christian life—how to do it well and where it puts us in relationship to God, we need only remember the words of another of our readings for today, words from Jesus’ own prayer book, the Psalms, words that reassure us that not only is the community of the Church something we can rely on and relax into, we can rely upon a God whose love for us and for the world outruns every inadequacy and anxiety we may have. From Psalm 139:

“Lord, you have searched me out and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up. You discern my thoughts from afar. You trace my journeys and my resting places and are acquainted with all my ways. Indeed there is not a word on my lips but you O Lord know it altogether. Where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven you are there; if I make the grave my bed you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the innermost parts of the sea. Even there your hand will lead me and your right hand will hold me fast.”