

## Living with Open Hearts

(Matthew 5:1-12)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
All Saints' Sunday, November 5, 2017

In the name of one God – creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

Yesterday was the 223<sup>rd</sup> annual convention of the Diocese of Virginia. Macon and I, along with a few hundred other clergy and lay delegates, spent the day at Christ Church in Glen Allen debating and voting on various resolutions, receiving updates from diocesan committees, and hearing pastoral addresses from our bishops.

Among the resolutions were ones affirming the diocese's position on equality for all of God's children, condemning racism and hate-speech as seen in Charlottesville, calling for support and resources for the victims of drug addiction and their families, opposing wage theft, and recognizing the need for more transportation options in Central Virginia to give everyone – particularly low-income families – access to more services and job opportunities. They were resolutions based on the continuing need to put faith into action and to be the hands of God in the world.

And these declarations, as with everything else on the agenda, fell under the umbrella of the convention's theme, *All Hearts Open*. It was based on the Collect for Purity that we pray at the beginning of our service of Holy Eucharist:

*Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

All hearts open. Hearts open to service. Hearts open to compassion. Hearts open to love.

What I witnessed from clergy colleagues and friends from churches throughout the diocese was the desire to create new opportunities for bringing a glimpse of God to those for whom God's love may be absent. I saw a Church that is seeking new, meaningful ways of bringing love and support to those suffering in body, mind and spirit. And throughout the day, I thought time and again of today's Gospel reading and the theme of being blessed.

In a recent reflection I wrote for the diocese's stewardship campaign, I looked at this reading from Matthew and how and when the blessings are promised. At the beginning, Jesus speaks on blessings on those who are suffering in spirit, or are in mourning, or are feeling powerless. The blessings they will receive are a reflection of the difficult lives they are living.

But then, as Jesus continues, we see a turn in the blessings. We move to a series of blessings that will be given to those based on what they are giving. They will be received by those walking with a pure heart, or showing mercy to others, or seeking to do the difficult work of acting as peacemakers. Blessings are bestowed on those suffering because of the righteous lives they are leading, or persecuted for trying to walk through life in right relationship with their neighbors.

As with the theme of the convention, blessings – those given and those received – are bestowed when one’s heart is open. When we open our hearts to the needs of those around us, opportunities for outreach – for service – are presented to us. And in opening our hearts and working for others, we open ourselves to the possibilities of receiving our own blessings.

There’s something else about this Gospel that is very important to me, and that is the location. Jesus is speaking to the people from what is described as a mountain. It may not be a mountain in the sense that we think of, rising hundreds or even thousands of feet above the ground. In this case, in fact, it may be more of a rise or a hill than a mountain. But it is still a place of elevation, a place to go for a better view. Here, it is the crowd listening to Jesus that receives a better view – not of their present surroundings, but of their future blessings.

Mountaintop experiences were important in the life of Jesus, and they also were important in the life of one whose life was paralleled in many of the incidents experienced by Jesus: Moses. Moses was the forerunner and the bringer of the law, and Jesus was the new Moses, the interpreter and fulfillment of the law. Consider the number of memorable moments in the life of Moses that took place on mountains – receiving the tablets of the law, talking face to face with God, even the moment when he was allowed to look upon the Promised Land (a land he would never be able to enter). In these mountain moments, I think that Moses, too, was given a better view. In this case, it was a view of the future promised to the Israelites – a view of a future guided by God’s law, of life in a land where they will be free of enslavement.

And here, we have Jesus on a mountain, speaking life into a vision of the future promised to those who followed him to this spot. Moses led the Israelites to a moment where they glimpsed the coming blessings from God; Jesus has led his followers to a moment when they, too, glimpsed the coming of their own blessings. But before receiving what has been promised, I think they needed to live with open hearts – the same open hearts we need to truly receive God’s blessings, the same open hearts that allow us to look with compassion on the needs of others and to act on their behalf.

When we follow Jesus, when we live with open hearts to the possibilities before us, we can be led to our own mountaintop experiences.

When we live with open hearts, we can lead those struggling in the dark valleys of life to a glimpse of a new life on the bright peaks.

May God always keep our hearts open – to the blessings rooted in how we live, and the blessings offered in what we give.

Amen.