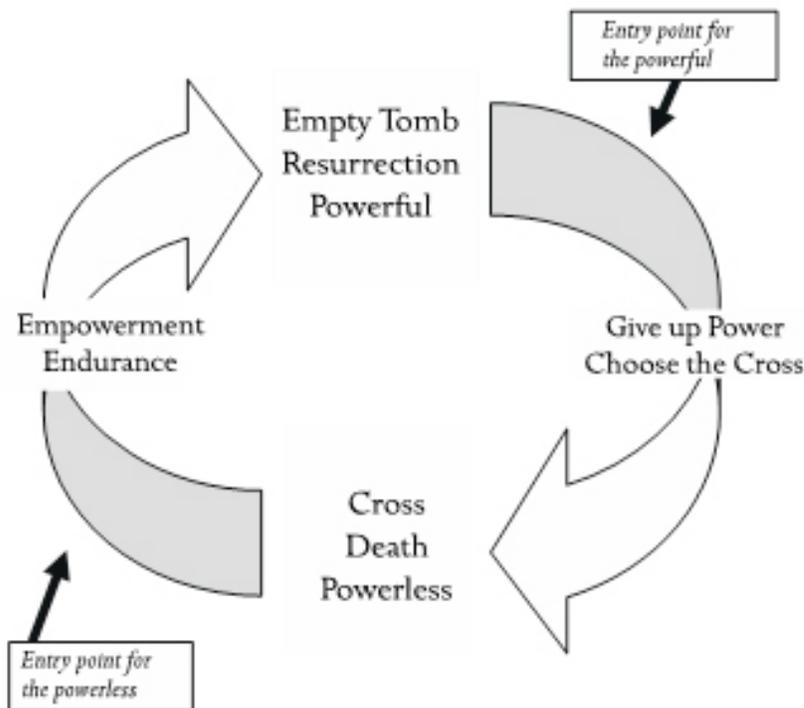


+  
AMDG

Epiphany 4A - January 29, 2017

# CYCLE of Gospel Living



Today's Gospel, is the first section of the Sermon on the Mount, given by Jesus to his followers at the beginning of his ministry. It forms the core of his moral teaching. And the beginning of the sermon, the Beatitudes, shows us the upside down logic of God, which St. Paul calls "foolishness." Clearly God's values are not ours.

In the Beatitudes Jesus showed how we can recognize blessedness, or happiness. And, it goes completely counter to what we would normally consider blessing. Jesus doesn't say, blessed are the rich and powerful, blessed are the safe and successful, or blessed are the rule-followers or the law-abiders. He focuses on an entirely different group - the poor in

spirit, the humble, the despised, the lowly, the hungry - all those the world would consider losers.

The chart you have on the front of your bulletin (in your hands) was created by Episcopal scholar, Fr. Eric Law. I've been reflecting on this graphic through the week and would like to share some of my observations with you.

The Cycle of Gospel Living graphically shows the process we go through, in the light of the Gospel, a cycle whose ultimate goal or destination is Resurrection. In a sense it's a graphic representation of Jesus's teaching; made real for us through his words, actions, life, death, and resurrection. It can describe the continuous cycle we each go through in life, again and again, as we try to respond to God's call. And, in a larger sense it shows the cycle all humanity goes through as they make their way to ultimate union with God in Christ.

Let's look at the top - Resurrection/Empty Tomb/Power. We can look at this in several ways - it can mean the defeat of sin through Jesus' passion and resurrection, showing that God's power of love cannot be shattered by death. It also refers to our Christian Hope of ultimate union with God in Christ. But it's also the present reality - our resurrected life here and now, the life eternal, the Kingdom of God within. It is in the smallest sense and in the largest sense our **Salvation**.

Now as we go counterclockwise, we see the entrypoint into Gospel Living for the Powerful. You see it's farthest away from Resurrection. If you haven't guessed by now, this refers to most of us, because in this age and in this nation, with some exceptions, we are among the most privileged and powerful people that have ever lived. We have access to more power, more information, more comforts and pleasures than any other people in the history of humanity. Jesus observed 2000 years ago that the powerful have the most difficulty living out the Gospel. And, it's just as true now as it was then, if not more so. Why is that? Because the privileged and powerful tend to get stuck in the things of the world; and we have more of those things, so there are even more opportunities to get trapped. Those who enter the cycle **here**, can confuse earthly blessings - wealth, possessions, prestige, security, power - with happiness, and so try not only to get more, but to desperately hold on to what they have. Those who enter **here** also either judge, scapegoat, or

ignore those who enter **here** - they're the unlucky, the losers, the lazy, the unmotivated. One cannot read through Scripture without regularly hearing how difficult it is for those **here** to get **here**.

So, then, how do the powerful move through the Cycle. Well, this is going to be a hard one to hear my friends - it's always been a hard one for me to accept - but it *is only through emptying ourselves - letting go of power and privilege* that we can move through the Cycle. Jesus said it many times and in many ways - you have to give up what you have, you have to humble yourself, you have to be a servant, you have to take up your cross. Now, does this literally mean we have to give up everything and live as beggars? Well, for some it may mean just that. Throughout Christianity there have been some who were called to walk that path.

And, there are other ways we move beyond power and privilege as well. Most importantly, we are called to use the wealth, power, and privilege with which we have been blessed to stand up for the poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed, and the despised - those whom the world rejects. It means speaking out when people are scapegoated or targeted because of the color of their skin, their national origin, their religion, or their economic situation. This what we heard Micah proclaim today, and which all the prophets have cried to us to do. We can also use our wealth, power and privilege to serve the lowly. And, I'm not talking about pity and charity, which is just another form of judging. I'm talking about relationship. Some do it through direct service to the poor and the rejected, such as with St. Andrew's Children's Clinic- and it doesn't just mean serving them, but also getting to know them and coming to love them. Pity, suspicion, and judgment melt away when we enter into relationship with those unlike us.

For some of us letting go can mean releasing anger and hatred, the difficult road of forgiveness. For many it means letting go of fear and trusting God. And, for others, letting go can mean letting go of arrogance and self-satisfaction and opening ourselves to new ways of seeing the world, to fascination, and wonder, and amazement.

Another way for those **here** to move through the cycle is acceptance. - this is another tough one. Often when the powerful are met with misfortune - loss of wealth and power, loss of health, loss of loved ones, - their response is to go to any lengths to get back what they've lost or to

avoid facing their loss. The Gospel teaches that when we are met with loss, we should draw closer to God, and many of us have experienced this. Some of the most painful times in my life have also been when I've felt closest to God, and many of you have shared the same experiences with me. Sadly, during dark times, those who enter the cycle **here** will often not turn to God. Rather they live in denial, avoid their feelings, turn to addiction, refuse to accept help, blame others for their misfortune, get mired in self-pity, or try to rely exclusively on their own resources to get back **here**. Those who live in acceptance however, are able to use loss to go through the cycle - embracing their crosses, and thereby discovering their Divine Selves, the power of Christ within. And, for everyone prayer, especially contemplative prayer, is absolutely necessary to keep us moving in the Cycle. Prayer keeps us humble, enables us to access the true source of power, prevents us from attachment to the things of the world, and helps us stay connected to God and all of Creation, especially with the poor, the oppressed, and the rejected.

Then we have the access point for the Powerless, those Jesus refers to in the Beatitudes. They're blessed because they are closer to the top. They start out free of the things that impede the powerful and privileged. Some who begin life powerful end up powerless - through addiction, debilitating or catastrophic illness, violence, or profound loss. Though, Jesus called them blessed, the lowly by no means have a free ride. They have their own challenges. They can easily get stuck through complacency, defeatism, and by denying their own power and blessedness. And, many, deceived by the world, try to go backwards, falling into the same trap that the powerful and privileged fall into, believing worldly success to be the true goal in life. But when the powerless humbly turn to the power of God, access their own inherent dignity, bravely endure their lowliness and pain, and valiantly do what Life puts before them - they find the Kingdom of God within. The path of the lowly is most beautifully described in the Serenity Prayer, used by those in Twelve Step Programs - God, grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Those who follow the Twelve Steps also regularly use the Prayer of St. Francis - *Lord, make me a channel of*

*your peace.* We have much to learn from those who follow the Twelve Steps.

My dear brothers and sisters, in the next four weeks we will hear some of the most difficult and challenging of Jesus' teachings, in which he clearly asks those that follow him to walk a path that is countercultural, counterintuitive, and eventually leads us to the Cross. But the Cycle of Gospel Living takes us through the Cross to Life Eternal. Staying stuck in the Cycle is the way of Sin and Death. May our minds and hearts be opened to the foolishness that is true wisdom and leads us all to the fullness of life in Christ.