

Fourth Sunday, Ordinary Time, 2023—

Nationally, we're about to enter...Catholic Schools Week. It's an appreciation week for almost 3 million Catholic school students and for 150,000 Catholic schoolteachers including more than 10,000 students in our Green Bay Diocese and more than 1,200 diocesan schoolteachers in our Catholic school systems.

Many of us, I know, can remember when most teachers in Catholic schools were nuns. They were extraordinarily generous with their time and their talent. And the work they did for millions of people endures today.

You may know that Vatican City, which is surrounded by the metropolis of Rome, Italy, is an actual country of the world—a nation state like the United States—and last spring, its diplomatic representative to the United States—he's called the...papal nuncio— Archbishop Christophe Pierre, spoke to a group of Catholic schoolteachers in Washington, D.C.

He talked with them about how nearly everyone who comes to Rome goes to see and marvels over the Pietà, the awesome statue of Mary and Jesus carved from marble when the artist Michelangelo was just 22 years old.

The papal nuncio said: "Michelangelo... is considered one of the greatest artists in the world. I don't believe it! The greatest artists are the educators—are you—because you try to sculpt the best of yourselves—of who you are and what you know—not in a piece of artistically carved marble, but in living, breathing human beings, who are the glory of God."

What a beautiful tribute to teachers, right?

And, I think, a fitting introduction to today's Gospel, where we hear from the greatest teacher of all, giving his most famous lesson of all, the Sermon on the Mount about the Beatitudes.

Over the years, the Sermon on the Mount has been called many things. One scholar calls it...“The Magna Carta of the Church.” Another calls it “The Manifesto of Love of the Lord, Jesus Christ.”

But we might call it the supreme teacher's lesson plan—his syllabus—his instruction to us about how to achieve holiness and happiness—  
how to be a disciple of Jesus.

And it all comes through in the Scripture we just heard—the Beatitudes Scripture.

In his book “Jesus of Nazareth,” Pope Benedict XVI writes that The Beatitudes amount to nothing less than a self-portrait of Jesus.

In the meek, the merciful, the clean of heart, the persecuted...Jesus is, in fact... describing himself.

And—by extension— if we are to be his followers—his disciples—then you and I can assume he is describing his vision for us.

This is what we are all about. We are Beatitude people. Or, at least, we should be. The fact is this:

In the Beatitudes, we are given more than just suggestions in how to be good people. We are given an abiding lesson in how to...love!

And again and again, we are told, it lies not in more...but in less. It's a giving of yourself and myself to another. And it involves humility...sacrifice...and even suffering.

And out of that, we are blessed. Out of that, we can be...happy.

And that—everyone—is truly radical news. If you're doubting that, then maybe you've been missing your telephone newsfeeds or your television nightly news....

The other day, Forbes Magazine reported that one of the driving forces in our American economy is...Kim Kardashian. By their estimate, she is annually responsible for more than \$120 million of the American economy.

Then...if you add up the money that others make every year because of her— photographers, magazine and tabloid writers, promoters, security personnel, record companies...and even her three ex-husbands—that's estimated at an additional \$120 million.

These huge money numbers and the bling and the fame they help produce seem to be what matters most to the world. And...not meekness...not humility... not hunger for righteousness. And that is why...The Beatitudes are so radical. Because self-lessness is radical.

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness are radical. Love—true Christian love—is radical.

Our Gospel today is sometimes read at weddings—and for good reason. Its words show us how true love is demonstrated. It's through steady, committed, selfless, sacrificial love...the same love God has for his creation—and for us within it.

And we couldn't be learning about all this at a better time.

In just about three weeks, we will enter Lent to spend 40 days preparing for Easter.

And, in teaching terms, today's Gospel is really our text to prepare for our Lenten Season. You might say: This is our Lenten preparation homework.

So, what can we learn from this inspiring homework—what's it encouraging us to do? What can we do over the next few weeks to be poor in spirit...to be meek...to be kind and merciful? How can we become better at loving?

Jesus showed us how...in how he lived...and how he died.

In a few moments here, we will share more actively and more consciously in that life of Jesus as we gather around this altar and remember him in our Liturgy of the Eucharist, just as he asked us to. Being able to do that is his greatest gift to us because when we do the rituals of remembering him, we receive the gift of himself.

At the same time today, we can be more aware of another gift—the gift of his words that he proclaimed centuries ago on the top of that sermon mount in Israel—words that have echoed down through countless generations.

They make up an enduring, essential lesson of the world's greatest teacher—and, as papal nuncio, Archbishop Christophe Pierre might put it in artistic terms—its greatest artist.

So, we are not only Jesus' learners. We are his artistic material—his marble rock to be sculpted into something beautiful.

Now, as we lead up to Lent during the next few weeks, we can pray we become more committed about living what the great teacher, Jesus himself, keeps teaching us—as he is teaching us today—teaching us his Beatitudes...so that we continually learn from them...and—as a result—live more consciously in God's grace—and, with God's help—make of our lives a happier, more giving, Beatitude work of art.

Please give it some thought....