

"THE Sermon"¹
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church
 Lewisburg, West Virginia
 January 29, 2017

Micah 6:1-8

1 Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. 2 Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

3 "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! 4 For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. 5 O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

6 "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Matthew 5: 1 - 12

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

If the Gospel of John is about light overcoming the dark and Mark about the miracles and actions of Jesus. If Luke is the one most concerned with social justice, then Matthew is the one

¹ A good portion of this sermon is taken from a sermon preached at University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in January of 2011.

who wants us to know that, if we remember one thing about Jesus' life, it should be his teachings.

We know that it was important to Matthew because it's what he emphasizes in his text. The Sermon on the Mount, which we begin today, is not only the longest segment of teaching in Matthew, it is larger than the comparable examples in the other gospels. Matthew puts it first, and he makes it bigger. Matthew chapter 5 through the 29th verse of chapter 7.

If what Maya Angelou said about believing who people are when they tell you is true, this is the place we should look before any other to see who Jesus is. What he believes. What he wants us to believe in order to live into who we were created to be. Beloved children of God. Members of the beloved community. Neighbors in the world.

Matthew tells us that Jesus sat down on the mountain to teach. Matthew tells us it was on a mountainside, but it was really more of a hill. A hillside by the water. Jesus is placed on the mountain because that evokes images of Moses. Jesus sat because that was the way teachers taught in Jesus' time.

Matthew then tells us that his disciples came to him to listen. How many disciples? Well, all we know Jesus to have at this point are the four Matthew has told us about. The focus of last week's text—Peter, Andrew, and the Zebedee boys. Did Matthew really mean that there were only four people listening to Jesus?

Disciples here, in Matthew, refers to disciples with a little "d." Not the 12, but all who seek to follow Jesus. The church. The faithful who sat on the hill to listen, the faithful who have sat in living rooms and sanctuaries throughout the centuries, and the faithful here. Now. We are the ones Jesus is teaching.²

And these words stand. These words of teacher Jesus. Heard for the first time. Written. Read and heard again. Copied onto parchment. Printed on the page. Pixels on a screen. Experienced. Memorized. Pondered.³

Jesus, in Matthew, the Son of God. Messiah. One sent to save. One sent to teach. Jesus the teacher. And this is his sermon. THE sermon.

They come to us, today.
And are just as real as they were 2000 years ago.

Blessed are the meek. The poor in spirit. The peacemakers. Those who hunger and thirst.

Blessed.

Blessed.

² Eugene Boring, "Matthew," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995, 174-175.

³ An idea borrowed from Carol Howard Merritt in her sermon for this week on Day 1.
http://day1.org/2543-blessed_are_those_who_mourn accessed January 28, 2011.

Is Jesus telling us we should be meek? Poor of Spirit? Hungry?

Merciful. Peacemakers. We can wrap our minds around those, but all of it? Is that what we are supposed to do?

The thing is, these verses aren't telling us what God is going to do, they tell us what God is already doing.

It doesn't say, Be meek and God will give you a blessing, it says, "blessed ARE the meek."

These verses, this fundamental teaching of Jesus isn't about some ideal world, about what to do when the kingdom arrives, it is about how we are to live in the here and now. Where there IS injustice. Where there IS grief. Where there IS hunger.

These words, they aren't so much a road map as they are a weather report. And they come to say, to a people in need, that God is here. And God has not forgotten you.

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

What do we hear?

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

The poor in spirit. A poverty that has nothing to do with a bank balance or the number of friends someone has, but how someone understands that their very being is a gift from God. The poverty here isn't a financial poverty or a spiritual poverty, it is those who, whether rich or poor, are not defined by anything other than their relationship to God. Those who know that self-reliant and self-made are oxymorons for followers of Jesus. Poor in spirit, standing in need of the only one who can truly save.

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

Blessed are those who are not afraid to speak out about wrongs, and not only to speak out, but to lament. To weep. To cry out for a balm in Gilead. To weep like Rachel for children who are no more. To mourn, for injustice. For wrong. For our own sin. To cry out in anger at the disconnect between what God asks and what we do. To grieve the losses. For those who lament, they will be comforted. It does not say that all pain and sorrow will be taken away, but that they will not be alone. There will be those who answer the call to weep with those who weep, and who will stand with them in looking to, resting on the vision which God has prepared.

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

Blessed are the meek. That's right. The meek. Bullying only begets bullying. You know who is described as meek in the Bible? Moses. And Moses, by allowing himself to be used by God, delivered a people from slavery into freedom. Meek did that. Many of the first followers were anxious to figure out how they could rid themselves of their Roman occupiers. Jesus is beginning to make it clear to them that he is not the military leader many had expected. He

says to them, you can't get rid of the Roman occupiers by copying the Roman occupiers. And so, those who are living the difference they want to see, the meek, the humble, are blessed with the earth itself.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are those who want things to be different. Those who want their way to be God's way. For those whose eyes are fixed on what God has in store. Whose hearts are set on God's vision, and God's hope. Who know that true righteousness isn't something we accomplish or earn but is given. For those who hunger for it, for God, Jesus is given. They will be filled.

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

"Mercy is when I unscrew the lid on what is precious to me and pour it out on you," James Howell writes.⁴ Mercy. Those who help others not out of logic or debt but love. It is compassion, but more than compassion. Forgiveness, but more than forgiveness. It is Joseph agreeing to marry a woman pregnant with a child that is not his child. It is a father hiking up his robe and running to greet the son who has wasted a fortune. Welcoming the stranger. Opening your door to the refugee.

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

The pure in heart. Not those who are without sin, but those who have a singular devotion. Matthew will later tell us that Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Focus. Like a child with a new box of legos. Sam, determined to get Frodo to Mordor no matter what. Blessed are those who keep their hearts focused on God, for their eyes will see God.

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

Peacemakers. Those who are actively pursuing peace. Brokering the agreement. Working to create the world where we don't practice war any more and can all lay down our swords. No matter whether the swords are bombs built intelligently, voices raised to strike, or hearts hurt by love withheld. Whatever the sword, on all the battlefields, blessed are the peace-doers. The peace makers.

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

Persecution that has come because you are a person of faith. Because you believe. Because you have acted. And. Persecution that has come at the hands of, in the name of faith. Neither kind is okay, and those who are persecuted are blessed.

*11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

*12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

If the gospel doesn't upset you, you aren't paying attention. Jesus is turning things upside down. There are some people who are going to greet this change with open arms and joyful voices. There are many others who will dig in their heels and refuse to let go of what

⁴ Howell, James C. The Beatitudes for Today. Louisville: WJK, 2006, page 65.

they know, whether what they are holding on to is riches or anger or perceived position. The goal of the Gospel is not to provoke, it is to save, but such provocation seems to be an unavoidable companion of faithful change. Those who are willing to take that risk for truth are not only blessed, they stand in a long line of witnesses.

The Beatitudes. Blessings. Not about things to come or what we need to do in order to be blessed, but the word of blessing that has already been given. Already sent. Already promised. THE sermon.

These words, not so much a road map as they are a weather report. And they come to say, to a people in need, that God is here. And God has not forgotten.

Not just to you or me, but to us, to all of us.

Fred Craddock has said that "It is more difficult to hear and receive a blessing than to attempt to achieve one."⁵

I suspect he is right. And I suspect that is why it is so tempting to hear these beatitudes as commands. As Shoulds rather than You Ares.

Why we much more naturally study them like a map rather than receiving them as a gift.

God, Jesus teaches us today. Is blessing us.

And that means not so much **asking** for meekness or persecution but **striving**, each in our own way, to live in the world that doesn't require meekness or peacemakers but is a kingdom world in which all are valued and all are fed. Where we all do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Are we willing to go where God is already blessing?

Are we willing to follow the Gospel?

When we have doubts. When we wonder if we are capable.

When we aren't sure what action to take that will show who we are and what we believe.

We have each other.

And we have these words.

We have this Sermon. The sermon. And the Jesus who gave it.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=707>
 Accessed January 28, 2011.