

Preaching Discipleship: The Preamble

Matthew 5:1-12

January 30, 2010

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.

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What we just heard begins Jesus' longest speech in the gospel of Matthew. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are known as "the sermon on the mount."

I've often wondered about Jesus the preacher. Not for comparison's sake, mind you. Comparing yourself to Jesus is usually a bad idea. My interest is in Jesus' preaching. Call it an occupational obsession, but I'm curious. Miracles, I can't do. Healings either. I can't walk on water, I'm not one to overturn tables, I've never spent 40 days in the wilderness. But preaching - that is something with which I am familiar.

I wonder if Jesus the preacher ever re-used the same story in a sermon? I wonder if he practiced his sermons before he gave them? I wonder if he used notes?

Did the people Jesus preached to ever fall asleep? Did he get angry visits at the carpenter's shop because some folks thought he went from preaching to meddling in some sensitive issue?

More specifically, I wonder what Jesus' purpose was in preaching. Believe it or not, there are some preachers who aren't quite sure about their purpose. Sometimes they just like to hear themselves talk. Sometimes they preach in order to gain their congregation's approval or admiration. Sometimes they want to demonstrate how smart they are.

From what I can tell, Jesus' reason for preaching has more integrity and urgency than that. Jesus preached in order to affect change. His purpose was to illustrate the kingdom. He preached so that those who heard him would respond. For Jesus, sermons were an opportunity to train disciples. He was equipping those who heard his words in order that they might follow him into the vision of the world that God was bringing into view.

I notice that Jesus doesn't preach to individuals. He preaches to communities. To his group of disciples. To the crowds. In fact, one of the reasons why Matthew lifts this sermon to our attention is because in it, Jesus is preaching to the church. To you and to me.

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For the next four weeks we will be following the lectionary and focusing on this sermon in Matthew's gospel. We are only going to make it through the 5th chapter, but I encourage you to read the whole thing as we go along. What you'll find is that Jesus does what most good preachers should in their sermons: he gets right to the point. He talks about real life: about relationships, about money, about prayer, about anxiety, and about salvation.

In this sermon we will spend some time on, Jesus doesn't describe faith in pretty and pious ways, not in Hallmark ways. Instead he speaks powerfully about what it means to live according to a different set of norms; about how to live once you put your trust in the living God. And the expectation is that this kind of living will change us; it will turn us around and reorient us to God's reality, to the kingdom of heaven.

All of this starts with Jesus opening his sermon with some familiar words: the beatitudes.

Scholars liken the beatitudes to the preamble of our country's Constitution. Test your patriotism and knowledge of US history by remembering what it says:

"We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and to our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

Preambles are really vision statements. Their purpose is to be broad and aspirational. They set the trajectory for whatever it is that follows.

In a sense, preambles and vision statements do not describe reality. They point beyond it toward something that is hoped for. The preamble of our constitution points toward the dream of a Union that is still being perfected. It is one of the reasons why America is such a great place to live - we are never simply satisfied with the way things are because we are always working for and anticipating the day when things will be better.

The same is true of the beatitudes that open Jesus' famous sermon. They are not reality; not yet. Think about it. The poor in spirit? Those who mourn? The meek? The peacemakers?

To illustrate the point, listen to what a friend of mine suggests might be a realistic take on our present-day beatitudes:

Blessed are the thin and beautiful, for they will define what is good.
Blessed are the famous, for they will get all the attention.
Blessed are the rich, for they will get to make decisions for everyone else.
Blessed are the power-brokers, for they get to create the rules.
Blessed are those who stoke fear and mistrust and blame, for they will get primetime exposure.¹

In his vision statement, Jesus balls up the map of modern day reality and replaces it with a different set of values². The word he uses to communicate those values is "blessed" which connotes both salvation and peace. In presenting his list of those who are blessed, Jesus is describing what being in sync with God is like³. And, more pointedly, he is asking us to live up to this new kind of vision.

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If the beatitudes are our vision statement for being disciples, I wonder how we are doing? Consider what it might look like to measure your life against the beatitudes.

If being poor in spirit is about coming to the end of our resources and recognizing that our security depends - not on ourselves – but on God, then I, for one, have got a long way to go.⁴

It is easy for me to mourn those I know; those with whom I identify - but if mourning means allowing myself to be in solidarity with the full freight of the pain of the world, I have to admit that I would rather simply escape and turn on the TV.

¹ With thanks to the Rev. Shannon Johnston Kershner, Pastor/Head of Staff at Black Mountain Presbyterian Church.

² Howell, James C. *The Beatitudes for Today*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006, p. 1 as cited in the Rev. Jessica Tate's good paper on this text from The Well (2010).

³ Howell, p. 32 (again, with thanks to Jessica).

⁴ Long, Tom, *Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997, p. 46.

I'm not bad about talking about righteousness, but do I hunger for it; pursuing it with my actions and in all aspects of my life?

I come to church on Sunday and go to meetings throughout the week, but how pure is my heart? How single-minded is my devotion to God? How often do I feel like my allegiance is shattered into a thousand little pieces?

There are times when I seek peace - times when I work to resolve conflict, but the reality is I am generally satisfied with the way things are and my place within those things. More often than not, I am willing to settle for a slightly different version of the world we have - where my privilege remains...a far cry from the kind of peace of which Jesus spoke that takes privilege from the powerful and lifts up the lowly.

Measuring our lives against these blessings, it's not hard to see the gap between the values that inform our living and the values of God's kingdom - but it would be a mistake to let guilt or despair be our response. Jesus does not offer the beatitudes to make us feel unworthy, or helpless - he speaks them in order to call us to something more; to something better.

Each of us - whether you have been a Christian for all of your life, or whether you are back in church to give this faith-thing another shot - each of us have signed on, not to belong to a club or a social network, but to follow Jesus. That is what it means to be a part of a church: when you join it, you are committing to walk in Jesus' way; to be called disciples.

Nobody said it was an easy journey. It takes us places we sometimes would not wish to go. If we take it seriously, it can put us at odds with the values of the world in which we live because we say there is more to life than money, success, and power. As disciples, we define our lives by faith, hope, and love.

We do that because there are times - always fleeting - but times when we actually catch a glimpse of the kingdom Jesus describes; times when we find ourselves acting most human, times when, as a church, we are truly being the church. And we recognize that these times are a blessing - they give us courage to reach for the world God intends.

They give us courage to live like the people Jesus calls us to become.