

A Sermon for the  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
January 30, 2011  
Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31  
Matthew 5:1-12

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“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one of who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

“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.’” Matthew 5:1-12

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain.” What follows is what is now known as the Sermon on the Mount. The most well known, arguably the most important, and the longest single segment of Jesus’ teaching in the gospels. We are blessed this year, in the same sense as that word is used by Jesus in the Beatitudes that begin the sermon, fortunate. We are fortunate this year, because of the late Easter, the last Sunday of April, to have a complete eight Sunday Epiphany season. The Epiphany season, like the Pentecost season, is flexible in length depending on the placement of Easter. It is uncommon for us to have the whole thing.

What it means in this year “A” of the three year lectionary, is that our gospel readings for the next five Sundays are a nearly continuous reading through the Sermon on the Mount. An opportunity we seldom have to hear it and preach on it in its full context. So that’s what we’re going to do for the remainder of Epiphany, focus on the Sermon on the Mount. First, let’s set the stage for the sermon by looking at what’s happened so far in the story. Matthew began with his particular story of Jesus’ birth, Joseph, the unexpectedly pregnant Mary, angel visitation, Magi following a star who bring extravagant gifts. The ruthless King Herod, fearful of his throne and power, seeks to do away with the child, murdering the baby boys of Bethlehem. What other famous Old Testament figure was born in the midst of a pogrom against Hebrew baby boys? Moses, of course. Joseph is advised to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt for safety. They lived there until Herod died, at which time God told them to come out of Egypt and settle in Nazareth. Who else came out of Egypt? Moses, leading the Hebrew people. Then Matthew’s story jumps Jesus’ adulthood, and we hear about Jesus baptism, Jesus in the water. Who else came through the water, the sea? Oh yes, Moses. After coming through the sea what does Moses do? Leads the Hebrew people into the wilderness. After Jesus is baptized, where does he go? 40 days in the wilderness. After being tested and affirmed in the wilderness, Jesus comes out preaching. Proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven has now come near. He calls some fishermen to become his first disciples, and tells them to follow him. As a sign of the kingdom’s nearness he goes throughout Galilee doing all sorts of miraculous healings.

Now we have reached the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew writes that when Jesus saw the crowds that were now following him, he went up the mountain. What other biblical figure went up a mountain? You got it, Moses. Moses had led the people to the mountain of God. He went up the mountain and there God spoke to him. God gave him God’s Torah, God’s teaching and commandments and so forth. Moses came down the mountain and delivered them to the people. Similar to Moses, now Jesus is going up the mountain. Perhaps Matthew wanted the readers of his gospel, when reading about Jesus, to think about Moses, the greatest Jewish prophet and leader of all. Jesus, like Moses, but more than like Moses. Moses went up the mountain and God spoke to him and he took word back to the people. The one who speaks up on the mountain is God. Jesus went up the mountain, there he spoke to the crowd, he is God speaking.

And his first words are what we know as the Beatitudes, perhaps the most well-known portion of the sermon. “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.” And so on. As a child, I remember the Beatitudes being one of those important passages we had to memorize, along with the Lord’s Prayer, John 3:16, and the Ten Commandments. And that’s how I thought about them I think, like Jesus’ Additional

Commandments. The parallels with Moses in Matthew's story almost invite you to see them that way. The first beatitude, blessed are the poor in spirit. The second beatitude, blessed are those who mourn. To the point that it began to seem like Jesus was commanding you to be poor in spirit, to be in mourning, to be meek, so that you would be blessed. The day came, though, when it hit me that something wasn't making sense here. What was so good about being poor in spirit, or sad, or meek, or hungry, or persecuted? There must be some other meaning to these beatitudes than what I had thought to begin with.

Being able to read them as part of this longer unit, the whole sermon, helps open up other meanings for them. The beatitudes are the introduction of the sermon, they are the words of welcome to the crowds gathered to hear him. Who are these people who have started following him? The poor and despairing, the sick and sad, the powerless and meek, the marginalized from the community, the hungry, physically and spiritually. The poor, the meek, the mourning, the hungry, are Jesus' audience. In other places Jesus describes his mission as bringing the gospel, the good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release to the captives, setting the oppressed free. In other words, bringing blessing to those who are downtrodden and afflicted. What this means to me is that in the beatitudes Jesus isn't laying out conditions for God's blessing, be poor in spirit, be meek, be sad, and so on. What he is doing is actually blessing his hearers. You whose experience of life is hardship, affliction, despair, oppression, God has special concern for you. I have come bringing the good news that God's kingdom is at hand, and the blessing of its arrival is especially for you. Because your need is greater than anyone else you are first to be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven. Rejoice and believe in this good news.

One of my favorite biblical scholars, Walter Brueggemann, has described "blessing" in this way: "A blessing is an act, by speech or gesture, whereby one party transmits power for life to another party. This act of transmission, which occurs in a world of intense interpersonal relationships, is not easily explainable....Viewed theologically, the transmission takes on the quality of the sacramental (something that bears the grace of God within it), so that more happens than can be explained. Human agents who are seen to be bearers of God's power for life can also mediate a blessing, more than "wish" peace, but rather by utterance, generates, assures, and bestows it, not just a polite wish or a good idea but an act of power." This suggests that Jesus is not establishing "conditions" for blessing, but announcing, transmitting, God's power for life, to those who are in most need of renewed power for life.

So, Jesus begins his sermon with an act of blessing, an announcement of the good news contained in the kingdom of heaven that has come near through him. The good news that with the kingdom of heaven is the power for life. What Jesus has sat down to preach about to these crowds of people is this kingdom of heaven he brings. God bestowing his blessing on everyone who draws near, announcing his love and compassion for them, bestowing the power for life on all of us, inspiration for when our spirits are poor, comfort when we are burdened by sickness or grief, encouragement and strength when we are feeling weak and powerless. We are the blessed of God, those he embraces and welcomes as his own children. We are the presence of the kingdom of heaven, where the kingdom comes near, we are blessed that we may be a blessing, pass on God's power for life. Having blessed his followers, Jesus moves on to describe and elaborate on the kingdom life. May we be blessed, empowered for life, in the coming weeks through our hearing his words. Amen