



THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
FEBRUARY 2, 2020
“THE BLESSED BROKEN”

MATTHEW 4: 1-12

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.

He said:

“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 satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful,
For they will be shown 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 because of righteousness,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.



SERMON

Learning anything is a process. I'll use playing the piano as an example.

Fifty plus years ago, I still remember Mrs. Kegelmeyer, my first teacher. She started out by showing me step one: here is middle c.

Mrs. Kegelmeyer was a tough old bird. She used to whack my hands with a ruler when I didn't hold my hands correctly. Maybe she was a nun in disguise.

But it did not stop with middle c. There was d, e, f, g, a, b, and then another c. This is the c major scale. Another step in the process. And there is a proper way to play the c scale with the correct fingering. Or watch out for that ruler.

Then there is the c major chord, comprising the notes c, e, and g. And, as quickly as possible, I progressed to putting three major chords together: c major, f major, and g major: "Louie, Louie, oh baby now, we gotta go." I didn't risk playing that in her presence. Probably would have been a taser.

Step by step, there is a progression for the piano disciple.

Now disciple is a fancy word for pupil or student. And, for Christian students, Jesus is the teacher.

And there is a progression for us as students.

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, there is first moss who comes down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments.

This is actually a major step forward. Before we have the law—the commandments—there is no law. Do what you want to whomever you want whenever you want. Have at it!

The commandments lay down the law, so to speak: show honor to God and to your parents, don't kill, lie, steal, cheat, or be envious of what others possess.

Now we've got a problem with our progress as students of our tradition if we stop with the Ten Commandments.

Why?

I'll briefly mention four reasons.

First, the Ten Commandments come from moss, not Jesus, so if we stop with the commandments, we are not following Jesus. Because Jesus re-interprets the commandments within his teaching.

For example, "you have heard it said you shall not kill, but I say to you if you are angry with your brother, you are liable to judgment."

Second, the commandments are conditional, meaning that if we keep them perfectly, God will look upon us favorably. But if we do not, then we are under God's judgement. And who among us keeps them perfectly?



Third, they are rules and part of the old morality, rather than the higher morality that Jesus teaches.

And fourth, if we stop with the commandments, God remains the lawgiver and judge, not the lifegiver and father.

Notice that when Jesus teaches the beatitudes he also is on the mountain—a parallel process to moss on the mountain. And Matthew hopes we catch the similarity so we pick up that some new teaching supersedes the Ten Commandments. And, rather than a written set of ten rules, Jesus teaches the crowd in a relational way.

It's the difference between you sticking rules on the refrigerator for your kids to follow and sitting down with them in the living room and having a conversation about behavior.

The beatitudes are a step forward in the progression of how to relate to people. They add something new. They address a lifestyle for those of us who follow Jesus centered on being vulnerable, on emptying ourselves of the obstacles that stand in the way of realizing God's presence, and on mutual support and cooperation.

St. Paul will write that the law—the commandments are like a school bus taking us to school. They keep us going in the right direction. But once we reach the school, where Jesus is our teacher, we are meant to progress to a higher morality and a deeper spirituality....

Neither of my sons is much of an athlete. Jacob, my oldest son, played on the middle school basketball team because the coach let anyone be on the team.

Jake hardly ever played, but he got in one game near the end of the first half and, as time was running down, launched a shot from the corner of the court that sailed way over the basket almost over to the other corner of the gym.

During halftime, the coach told him, "Well, it wasn't the worst shot I've ever seen."

Within our spiritual practice, Jesus does not wield a ruler to whack our hands when we fail or ream us out for a bad shot. Love is unconditional. We miss, we try it again. God is father and life giver not judge and lawgiver....

What is also different is that the beatitudes affirm a quality of spirituality that is already present, not a reward if we get it right.

As in the first beatitude, "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God."

It is not that if you are poor in spirit, the kingdom of God is yours.

In removing all the barriers within ourselves, we find the kingdom already present.

We may be drawn to the Ten Commandments because they are straightforward: thou shall not kill.

The beatitudes are paradoxical. The more we realize how much we don't know, the more present is the kingdom. As the ego disappears, the kingdom appears.



This is not the same as ignorance is bliss.

Within the discipline of being students of Jesus, we remain humble. In spiritual matters, we are always beginners.

Let's go back to the piano. Yes, I can play the piano pretty well, but only pretty well. Listen to Oscar Peterson, Thelonious monk, Stan Kenton, Billy Joel, or Elton John. I'll always be a beginner.

So, it is with the kingdom of God. As we realize how much we do not know, the kingdom begins to come into view.

When Christianity is a matter of head knowledge, then faith falls to the lowest common denominator: believing what the church says to believe. Faith as never questioning or never having doubts. Some kind of illusory certainty.

Rather, within the context of Jesus' teaching of the beatitudes, faith is the decision to keep your eyes open. A way of seeing. We know only a little, so it is good to stay alert and aware to our lives and where we see God acting in the kingdom around and within us....

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

The second beatitude echoes a passage from the book of Ecclesiastes:

"It is better to go to the house of mourning

Than to go the house of feasting....

Sorrow is better than laughter,

For by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning;

But the heart of fools is in the house of mirth."

One of the hardest funerals I ever preached was of a man who had never set foot in a church, was a lifelong alcoholic, and a regular Wildman.

His wife, brothers, and friends mourned his death and, I could tell, they were tense and worried about what I might say. What was there to say?

So, I started telling stories. How he and his brother used to stop at every bar on route 24 on Friday night and challenge anyone to a fight. And how they always won. How the brothers once went to their father's house and picked him up while he was sitting in his favorite chair and carried him outside. I may have ended up saying that he would likely challenge St. Peter to a fight at the pearly gates.

But in celebrating who he was in all his ragged glory, those who mourned were able to face their grief and find comfort in the stories of his life.



At a deeper level, it is when we are able to face our grief: the loss of our loved ones, the loss of our pets, the loss of our health, the loss that occurs because of evil, that we discover the gifts of empathy and compassion within us.

Suffering is a masterful teacher. Pain rearranges our priorities. We don't go looking for suffering, but when it finds us, we do not run, but face it head on.

We find a deep comfort given to us in being able to be with others in their losses. We enrich our humanity and find ourselves once again connected to the spirit of the one who suffered the loss of all on the cross....

“Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the land.”

By the time we get to the third beatitude, we begin to see another progression at work: first, the students who know the kingdom are the poor in spirit, not the arrogant and proud. Second, the blessed are not the happy folks, but those who mourn. Third, it is not the powerful who will inherit the land, but the meek.

In Jesus' day, the land referred to the Promised Land, but by the time of Paul, the meek were seen as one day inheriting the entire earth.

But who are the meek?

It is not the weak, passive, and mild-mannered folks.

In Greek, the word meek literally means those who have developed the strength to knock your head off, but choose to not do so.

Or another way to think about it is that the meek are those who become angry on the right grounds against the right person in the right manner at the right moment and for the right amount of time.

it is as if I have this rotten person in front of me who has hurt countless people, cheated others, treated people like dirt, and I bide my time until “pow.” Lights out. And then it's over....

I'll end with the fourth beatitude, just in case you were getting concerned that we would cover all nine this morning and be here until noon.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied.”

Righteousness does not have to do with the goodness of a person. It refers to a relationship.

In relationship with God, we freely receive every good gift. Our very life, eternal life, the presence of the spirit in our life, God working for us in every aspect of our life.

This is God's righteousness—his loving relationship with us.

The unspeakably gracious gift of our acceptance by God requires a response.



And, in biblical terms, the righteously responding person acts with justice: showing compassion to the outcast, the oppressed, the weak, the homeless, the hungry, the mentally ill, and the addicted.

Within the relationship with God, we show grace to the blessed broken.

In this beatitude, Jesus echoes the prophet Micah: “and what does God require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”

Further, the prophet Isaiah says that “the effect of righteousness will be peace.”

If we keep the law, follow the accepted standards of the community, and have a spotless personal life, we will be respected and therefore satisfied by the community.

But within the spirituality of the beatitudes, we work for justice and come down on the side of the blessed broken. What the community thinks is irrelevant. We rest in peace because we are in a righteous relationship with God and are satisfied in that relationship.

I’m afraid practice does not make perfect, with the piano and with our spirituality.

Our spirituality does not grow within rules and commandments. Our spirituality grows within the relationship with God, revealed to us in Jesus and his teaching.

SERMON SONG

WHAT YOU GIVE AWAY BY VINCE GILL