

“A New Kind of Hero
Matthew 5: 1-16
We Make the Road By Walking ch. 27
Lent 1A-20
March 1, 2020

Prayer for Illumination

Matthew 5: 1-16

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.

“You are the salt of the earth;
but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?
It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world.
A city built on a hill cannot be hid.
No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,
but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.
In the same way, let your light shine before others,
so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father in heaven.

“A New Kind of Hero”

As Joel said so well at our Ash Wed. service, friends, our Lenten journey has begun. It’s a journey that invites us to explore the distance between the lives we are living, and the life that Jesus says is real life. True life. Eternal life.

As we explore this distance in worship this season, we’ll be traveling through chapters 5-7 of Matthew’s Gospel, and chapters 27-31 in We Make the Road By Walking, the book we’ve been exploring as a whole church community this year. And on the fifth Sunday of Lent, March 29, Brian McLaren, author of We Make the Road, will join us via videoconference to help us reflect on insights gleaned along the Lenten roads we’ve traversed.

To be clear, we will be traveling quite a bit this Lent—metaphorically speaking. Amid each of the next six weeks, we’ll be moving back and forth between here and now, Towson in the year 2020, and the ancient region of Galilee some two millennia ago. We’ll be traveling back and forth between the lives we’re living today, and the lives to which Jesus pointed 2000 years ago when the huge crowds came to him at the very beginning of his ministry, clamoring for answers to their questions about life... and their yearning for real life... the life God intends.

As both Brian and Matthew invite their readers to do, we’ll be counting ourselves among that crowd gathering around Jesus and his disciples that early day in Jesus’ ministry. Evidently, while his ministry had only just begun, word had spread far and fast about this new rabbi... who offered these amazing new teachings... and had this amazing ability to heal people nobody else could heal.

So they began flocking to Capernaum... coming from all across Syria—from the Decapolis, from Jerusalem, from all across Judea and some... some had come from beyond the Jordan River.

That’s how fast... how far word spread. That’s how amazing this new rabbi seemed to be. That’s why so many people decided to travel for days... for weeks... bringing with them nothing but the very same question and yearnings you and I bring to Jesus. “What is life? What’s the point? What makes for happiness? What makes for success? What makes for peace?”

The way Matthew tells it, so many people came with their questions and yearnings that, when Jesus saw the masses gathering around him, he realized he had to climb a mountain to be seen and heard by everyone. So that’s what he did. He climbed a mount and began speaking to them. Except some say he wasn’t merely speaking... but preaching to his people. That’s why this portion of Matthew is called “The Sermon on the Mount.”

And boy. What a sermon it is. Seriously. What a sermon. What a jaw-dropping, rule-defying, punch-in-the-gut yet hope-filled, life-altering sermon.

You might argue I’m overstating it a bit. And I get it—I’ve been known to exaggerate. But not this. Not the sermon on the mount.

In fact, if you take the next six weeks of the Lenten journey seriously... if you join in our worship and exploration of Matthew 5-7 and We Make the Road By Walking chapters 27-31...

and you do the work of exploring the distance between the life you lead and the life Jesus says is real life... then I assure you... you'll agree. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount really is jaw-dropping, rule-defying, punch-you-in-the-gut yet hope-filled and life-altering.

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I mean, the beginning of his message gives it all away. From the get go, Jesus refuse to give any pretense. He makes no compromise.

He dives in, saying "Gather round, everyone. Make room. Shuffle over. Make room for everyone. And now... listen up."

"You want to know the things that make for life? You come to me clamoring for what breeds happiness... success... fulfilment in this world? Well, let me tell you. Or better, let me show you. These are the people you need to emulate. These are the types of people you should start aspiring to become."

And then he named them... maybe even pointed to them. To the world's poor. Those who were mourning and suffering grief. He pointed to the humble. The merciful. Those who didn't know how to be hypocritical. Those who sought seek justice for the downtrodden. Those who yearned for peace more than glory or security or power.

And he said, "Tell me... what exactly are your goals? Tell me about you're your ambitions right now? What do you prioritize?" Jesus asked.

"Or better yet... tell me who your heroes? Who in this world do you admire most? Who is it that you would love to emulate?"

The people just stood there scratching their heads—because what he was saying didn't make much sense according to the ways of the world.

But Jesus didn't bend. He said, "You need to know... it's not the rich or the powerful or the selfish who are blessed. Success isn't measured according to the metrics of this world.

"So if you want to uncover real life... then these should be your heroes. This is who you should aspire to be like... the poor... the humble... those striving for peace... and justice... and mercy."

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Fast forward 2000 years, and it's clear, the world still doesn't buy it. Not for a second.

Want an illustration? How about this one? Growing up... who were your heroes? Who did you dream of becoming? A peacemaker? Someone who sacrifices their own well-being in pursuit of peace for others? Or did you dream of becoming poor because you gave all of your possessions away? Did you ever dream about standing with the powerless, not because you had to but because you understood there was no better place to stand than with those who couldn't stand up for themselves?

How about now? Who do you admire today? Who... or what... do you aspire to do... to be here and now?

Growing up I deeply admired Martin Luther King, Jr. He's a heckuva hero—and one we should all admire. But I wasn't and still don't think I'm ready to give up everything I have in the pursuit of justice for all like he did.

Same thing with Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi, Oskar Schindler, Mother Theresa, and others who became famous for incredible humanitarian achievements.

I knew of them and deeply admired them. But these weren't the likes of my heroes. These weren't the people I aspired to be. Theirs was not the path I wanted to emulate.

Nor was Dr. Jonas Salk... who, in 1953, created the world's first successful polio vaccine. He could have made millions off of it. He could have set his family up for financial wealth for umpteen generations. All he would've had to do was patent it. But he refused. He turned away from millions because he knew if he patented it, millions of lives would be lost or harmed.

Or what about someone like Shaine Claiborne? Personally, I'm not sure how he does it. He walked away from a comfortable life of parish ministry in which he would've been hugely successful. Instead, he goes to work every day to serve the poor of Philadelphia, while advocating for things like the abolishment of capital punishment while advocating nonviolent resistance to systems that favor some and harm others.

Or who hear counts Erricka Bridgeford as a hero? Have you heard of Erricka? She's been devoting her life's work to the Baltimore Ceasefire movement in an effort to fight the epidemic of gun violence in our area. She's passionate, she's energetic, and she's making a heroic difference.

Then, just this past week, I learned of both the beauty and struggle within the Orendorff family. Some of you know them personally. This family of 9 attends Central Presbyterian, I believe, with their seven children. Seven because, in addition to having four biological children, they adopted a child they had fostered... and then agreed to take in that child's two younger twin siblings when needed. Now, this family faces the pain of a child with cancer—and the unspeakable hardships that follow such a traumatic childhood illness. And yet, still, I suspect the Orendorff wouldn't trade places with any of us, because of the heroic kind of love they share as a family.

These are the people Jesus says we should aspire to be.

So while the world tells us that the rich are blessed because they can buy whatever they want...

Or that those untouched by loss are blessed because they don't know the pain of grief.

Or that the powerful are blessed because they can control others...

Or that the crafty and opportunistic are blessed because they can rationalize there way around obstacles ...

Or that the tough and violent and the threatening are blessed...

While the world says *that's* whose blessed... that *that's* who we should strive to be... Jesus knows better. Which is why the very first thing Jesus says to the crowds and to you and me, as we come to him with our questions and yearnings about life is that...

If we want more of the same...

If we want to keep status quo in which a tiny fraction of the world lord's power and wealth over the rest...

If we like the status quo of every man for himself and to heck with everybody else...

If we like the status quo of wall-building and fear mongering and pitting people against people...

Then we can keep our heroes. We can keep idolizing the rich and the famous and seeking to emulate the powerful and the persuasive.

But if we want more out of life... if we want more not just for ourselves but for others as well... If we want to not only live into the blessings of God but spread them to others... If we want to create systems of justice rather than power... systems of grace rather than greed... systems that lift up rather than push down... then as McLaren summarizes Jesus so well, "we must choose a different definition of wellbeing," we must chose "a different model of success," we must live by "a new set of values"¹ as we look to new kinds of heroes. Not athletes or rock stars or warriors or politicians or the CEO or the popular crowd... but those who are faithful and committed enough to work for the common good... to strive for justice... to suffer for peace.²

From the very start of it all, this is the life to which Jesus points us...

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Lent invites us once more to traverse the distance between the lives we live, and the lives to which God is calling. And it begins with a complete and utter reframing of what success means. Of what success looks like. Of what success tastes like. Feels like.

Who do you aspire to be?

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"Blessed are the poor, who know what it means to be vulnerable and to trust in the kindness of others.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they know what it truly means to give and receive love.

"Blessed are the meek, who know enough to understand they don't know it all.

"Blessed are those who are sincere... who don't try to be anything other than who they are... and whose they are.

"Blessed are the merciful, who treat others as they would like to be treated.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, who strive for justice even at a personal cost.

"For these are the ones who know life... real life... life as God intends."

Amen.

¹ Brian McLaren, We Make the Road By Walking (New York: Jericho Books, 2014), 128.

² Ibid.