**“The Basics”**

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**Matthew 5:1-12**

**Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)**

Matthew 5:1-12 - The Beatitudes

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then 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. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

For those who attended college, you remember the 101 courses:

 English 101, Political Science 101, Biology 101, Calculus 101…

you can’t take the 201 course unless you’ve taken the 101 course, or gotten an exemption because you already know the material in 101.

The 101, 201 numbering system was developed in the early 1900s so that students could transfer from one college to another. If you took Calculus 101 at the University of Georgia and transferred to Michigan State University, you’re given credit at Michigan State so you can take Calculus 201, rather than having to take 1st level Calculus again.

If we apply this same approach to the study of religious faith, a course in Judaism 101 might be an in-depth study of the Ten Commandments. Buddhism 101 might focus on the Fourfold Truths, followed by the Eightfold path to enlightenment. Islam 101 might dig into the Five Pillars of Islam. Christianity 101 might focus on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which is recorded in Matthew and in, but Luke’s version is much shorter.

Christianity 101 would begin with the scripture we just read, The Beatitudes, because they articulate the core principles of what Jesus taught and how he lived his life.

The Beatitudes are simple, easy to remember, foundational principles, and it is critical for Christians to understand them. Think of them as core competencies, akin to knowing the multiplication tables in order to perform higher level mathematics.

As we know, Jesus did his teaching on the road and kept his teachings simple. When Jesus is asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” he responds with the Hebrew *shema*:

 “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind.”

He then adds to this Hebrew text found in Deuteronomy:

 “The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Simple, memorable, foundational words and the structure of the Beatitudes…the repetition of the Greek word *makarios*…which means *happy*, *satisfied*, or *blessed…* was familiar to most who were hearing Jesus’ words. However, as was typical of Jesus’ teaching, in the Beatitudes he was also turning *common wisdom* on its head.

The phrase, *kingdom of heaven*, brackets this passage. In the Beatitudes, Jesus isn’t describing life in the ordinary world where sinful humanity seems to be in charge.

Jesus is describing life in the emerging kingdom where God is sovereign. This world is a world where those who mourn are comforted; where those who are meek receive their inheritance; where those who seek the kingdom of God find it.

The Kingdom of God:

where *those who mourn* are comforted…

where *those who are meek* receive their inheritance…

where *those who seek the Kingdom of God* find their quest fulfilled.

Jesus, in the Beatitudes, was inviting those who were present when he spoke these words, and is inviting us, to be a part of living in and bringing about God’s intended kingdom.

The Kingdom of God shatters the limitations of time and space. We are linear thinkers and the Kingdom of God is the realm of the *here-and-now* and of the *not-yet*.

In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul tells us about this reality of the Kingdom of God:

 “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face.

 Now I know only in part; then I will know fully.”

The reality of the kingdom of God *being present now*, but *not yet being fully realized* causes a questioning look on many faces. But the Kingdom of God is what lies at the heart of the Christian hope. The hope that the kingdom we now catch glimpses of will ultimately be fully realized. The Beatitudes are a description of the Kingdom of God. In this description of life lived in the Kingdom of God, three questions are addressed.

*First, who are those who find the Kingdom of God?* Jesus says, “the poor in spirit” and “those who mourn.”

The poor have always held a special place within Judaism and certainly as well for those who follow Jesus’ teachings. But Jesus adds “in spirit”, driving deeper. The kingdom is for those who left behind their arrogance and ego; in other words, to be *poor in spirit* means you have accepted your utter dependence upon the grace and mercy of a loving God.

*Those who mourn* are not just those who are grieving the loss of a loved one.

*Those who mourn* are those who are brokenhearted over the way in which creation has turned its back on The One who created it in the first place and The One who continues to sustain it. But even as *those who mourn* observe and experience the many ways creation rebels against God, they also know the Kingdom of God is emerging in the midst of a sinful world. They take to heart Jesus’ words:

 “I have come that you might have life…life abundantly.”

*Second, what do those who seek the Kingdom of God find?*

They find “the meek” – those who are freed from undue pride and arrogance – will inherit the earth. No, not free real estate; the meek will participate in the “new heaven and new earth” spoken of in Revelation 21:1.

Our typical definition of meek does not encourage admiration. Meekness rhymes with weakness and that is the way most people relate to the word *meek*. The *meek* are those who don’t stand up for themselves; those who let others run roughshod over them. Weakness is not a synonym for meekness in The Beatitudes.

Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle, described ethical living as a mean or mid-point between two extremes. On one extreme was uncontrolled anger; on the other was a total lack of anger. In the middle of these two extremes was righteous anger, the middle way or what was sometimes called *The Golden Mean*.

Those who seek the Kingdom of God find that *those who hunger and thirst for righteousness* are filled. This *hunger and thirst for righteousness* is much more that personal piety. It is a seeking after a world in which sin and the disgraceful human condition has finally been overcome. That world is what Paul is speaking about in that verse from 1 Corinthians:

 *Now I know only in part; then I will know fully.*

The *merciful* are those who regard others with empathy and compassion…those who are not only willing to travel the same road, but also put on the shoes of those with whom they are walking the road. They will receive the compassion they freely give.

The *pure in heart* are those in God’s fully realized kingdom who are ultimately purged of ego and self-pride.

The *peacemakers*…those who in this world refuse to divide the people of the world into categories of “us and them,” of “friends or foes,” although they may be rejected by the world, God claims them as God’s own.

*Third, what price does the kingdom demand?*

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic work The Cost of Discipleship wrote:

 “…when Christ calls a man, he bids him “come and die.’”

Matthew’s record of The Beatitudes, unlike Luke’s record, includes verse 9:

*Blessed are the peacemakers.*

Matthew may have included *Blessed are the peacemakers* due to the Christian community’s refusal to fight alongside the Jews in their 60-70 A.D. war against Rome.

*Blessed are the peacemakers* is followed with verses 10 and 11 which describe “people who persecute you and revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely,” a description of the consequences those Christians may have experienced.

The Romans prevailed in that war and the Jewish Christians suffered greatly alongside their non-Christian Jewish neighbors. This brings us to a question…is it worth it?

Is it worth risking everything that the world values in the service of a kingdom that has not yet been fully realized? Even as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “when Christ calls a man, he bids him ‘come and die’” in the rest of his work – the work of a 20th century martyr – is a proclamation that “Christ’s call is primarily a call to life.” Though it may be difficult to see at times, the Kingdom of God is alive.

An elderly Methodist bishop glanced over the line of ordination candidates as an annual conference meeting in Corpus Christi, Texas. Just as we Presbyterians have questions we ask of those about to be ordained, so do our Methodist brothers and sisters. The first question of the Wesleyan questions, which the bishop asked, is:

 *Are you going on to perfection?*

The candidates for ordination were hesitant in their response to his question and he became irritated. “Well, if you are not going on to perfection, where are you going?”

It’s a good question. *Where are you going?* I’m not talking about the heaven and hell question. Are you going to be a part of the Kingdom of God that is alive even today? God’s Kingdom is present now even as we wait in expectation for the complete realization of God’s Kingdom. In a few minutes we will celebrate that fact when we come to the Lord’s Table to celebrate the Sacrament of Communion.

The Beatitudes…Christianity 101…an introduction to the Kingdom of God. Amen.