

Be Attitudes -

Sermon for Epiphany 4A

Matthew 5:1-12

Slide: Facebook, Instagram etcetera

At the start of our vacation on January 2nd, we stopped in Seattle for two nights to visit our family before heading to Hawaii from there. One of the things that we got to do was help my mother create her first streaming experience. Up until recently, my mom had satellite TV but the company told her that she had too many trees for that to be effective anymore and unless she wanted to cut some of them down, they did not feel they could give her adequate service anymore. Of course, my mother would never cut any tree down unless she had to. Like me she loves her trees, and she has these beautiful Douglas fir that surround her house. They're over 100 feet tall.

So, for her Christmas present we told her that we would help her set up her first streaming service by buying her a Roku and then showing her how to use an app so that she could watch her favorite TV. Now my 94 year old mother had some very particular personalized items that she wanted: she wanted certain news channels, she wanted PBS, she wanted her local stations, and she wanted to be able to watch her Seahawks play as well as her Mariners. After looking around it was quite clear that there was only one app that would work and that was fubo. So, we installed that and a few other apps and showed her how to use it. Needless to say, my 94 year old mother is doing just fine and enjoying streaming services. She's got the technology down!

Slide: people preferences

iTunes and Amazon music will tell you what music to buy based on your personalized preferences. Facebook and Instagram will show you ads that may interest you based on your personalized interests. A Fitbit will tell you how many steps you did today and

help personalize your daily active routines. It's getting to a point that if you want to personalize just about anything, you can. The world is so over personalized that if you don't like the news commentary you are watching, you can watch a different commentary to hear what you want to hear. You can unfollow the friends you disagree with, personalize the education of your child. You can even personalize your own spiritual beliefs without being held accountable for them.

In many ways, customizing our lives is awesome and it's a helpful tool and I'm certainly a product of these cultural changes we are seeing all around us. If we didn't have Facebook, the pandemic would have been very different for our congregation. Today we can't even imagine ourselves without being able to watch our worship services every Sunday while online; which reminds me- a special greeting to you who are watching us online right now! But, you can also imagine the downsides - a world where only my preferences, my beliefs, and my way of life are the most important. Personalizing everything in my life leads to me, myself, and I. I am by no means a social scientist or expert on these things, but it does seem rather like a logical conclusion. The more we focus on self, our own interests, and our own perspectives, the more we even begin to view Scripture with the lens of how it affects me. This in turn could lead us away from the needs of the neighbor.

Slide: Beatitudes

Let's take the Gospel reading for today. In what are some of the best known and beloved passages of Scripture, we hear Jesus essentially give us a New World Order - he shows us in this new world order, the Kingdom of God, is a radical turning around of what we usually consider to be how we are. By living this way, we will not only be blessed, but we will bring about the Kingdom of God. Today, we call these phrases of Jesus the "Beatitudes". The word "Beatitude" simply means blessed. And, if you would like to see the entire sermon and the depths of Jesus's intention for this radical Kingdom, you can read chapters 5 through 7 in Matthew's gospel. It's a marvelous sermon probably the best!

And in these phrases, which are often used on All Saints Sunday and at funerals, we can tend to personalize them. Certainly there are times when I mourn; therefore, I must be blessed when I do. Certainly I am poor in Spirit; therefore, I must be blessed when I do. When we hear Jesus say “blessed are you”, we may just be thinking “blessed is me.” And yet, I’m afraid the Greek here does not say that.

Slide: Blessed are THEY

Here in these beloved Beatitudes, Jesus actually switches subjects at the end of his list—for most of the sermon, he’s referring to “they,” a group of people perhaps not even present at the sermon itself. It’s only at the end that he switches to the second person and says, essentially to us, we may presume, that we are blessed when we are insulted or persecuted. Up until that point, it’s not “us” being blessed; it’s “them.”

Hear these words of Jesus again:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for THEIRS is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are the meek, for THEY will inherit the earth.”

Who are “them” or “they”? What does Jesus mean here? Aren’t we also blessed? It’s so easy to personalize the Bible readings that aren’t necessarily meant to be personalized. We can easily interpret “blessed are they who mourn,” to say “blessed am I when I mourn,” but that isn’t the way Jesus says it. In this very large crowd to whom Jesus is preaching, it seems as if he is referring others, calling those present at the sermon instead to take attention away from themselves and focus instead upon those who are missing. Who is missing from this crowd who needs to know they are blessed?

Slide: Seek Justice..

Throughout all of Scripture, it is clear that God has a unique preference and love for those who are on the margins: the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed. We hear this from the prophet Micah today as a reminder:

“God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

The Beatitudes, therefore, just as Micah would also remind us, are not a personal self-esteem booster, so that we can feel blessed, but they are a jarring reminder to us that those on the margins and those who are most negatively affected by the injustices of our world are especially beloved by God and must be especially served by those who are not on the margins. At any given time, some of us maybe in certain circumstances, but in this beautiful country of ours, it tends not to be the white mainline denomination that is marginalized.

Living with the preferences of God instead of our preferences means constantly looking around and wondering who we have left out so that we can find ways to bring them in; or, put another way we can better listen to them as they declare the change that they need. With this lens, we can see that we shouldn't be preoccupied with taking the Beatitudes personally – that is, as all about ourselves – when we could instead be watching for the neighbor who needs to hear that they are indeed loved and blessed by God. No, I'm not saying that we are not blessed when we mourn. We are. However, the grammar of his sermon suggest that he's Speaking of the you plural. You plural means them or they - it is a community of the blessed to which he speaks.

Slide: Be Attitudes

With this in mind, the Beatitudes become for us an ethical imperative from Christ. They are a code for our living and dying. They are the way for us to become the blessed ones when we stand

up for the ones who are blessed by Christ. They become for us the “BE ATTITUDES” – Be this way and with that way of living, we will bring about the Kingdom of God that is realized, not idealized or spiritualized.

But, a word of warning as Jesus says at the end of these statements –*when* we walk with those who are blessed in the name of Christ, we may be persecuted and reviled for it, but rejoice and be glad, for yours is the Kingdom of God when you do this.

It is a hard thing to live these attitudes. Yet, we live them because they bring about the full intentions of God’s Kingdom. These “Be Attitudes” get to the heart of who God is:

- Be lowly
- Be a griever
- Be a seeker of peace
- Be hungry to make things right
- Be merciful
- Be pure in heart
- Be faithful even when hated

Slide: Be a Blessing

This sermon is now going to end in blessing, but you are going to do the blessing. I want you to find someone in this sanctuary this morning you do not know at all. When you find that person, I ask you to trace the sign of the cross on each other’s foreheads and proclaim to one another - “Be a blessing to others in the name of Christ.” This is just a little moment in time for us to remind others that they are indeed blessed, blessed to follow Jesus, blessed to serve, and blessed to be Children of God.

Slide: Be a Blessing for others...