

Slide – Jesus teaching on the mountain

Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up the mountain, positioned himself and looked out. His disciples, who were following him, came near to him to listen to him. Then Jesus began to speak, teaching his disciples. He announced to all who would listen the good news of the kingdom of heaven. “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” A whole new order of life is unfolding. It is an alternative to what is regularly seen as shaping life, things that have power, privilege, and money to back it all up. Jesus was away from the centers of worldly authority when he announced his gracious rule. Those who had gathered around him were not heads of state.

Jesus announced divine favor to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and the meek. Jesus announced God’s favor on those who in obedience sought righteousness, mercy and a heart for God. Jesus announced divine solidarity with those who acted out of the nature of God to be beacons of peace and righteousness even if it meant they would suffer because of it.

When Jesus finished his teaching the scriptures tell us the crowds were astounded by him but we understand that far fewer of them actually followed him in paths of discipleship. It is a problem that exists in the scriptures, that Jesus is often admired but less often followed. It is a problem for today, that it is far easier to be an admirer of Jesus rather than a follower.

We come up against what we might call the values of the world today as we read these verses. Who is in versus who is out has not seemed to change much since the first century. Today we cannot help but to look up to those who use aggressive tactics to win their way. Today is Super Bowl Sunday, where winning at all costs is glorified. We are sucked in by the influence of millions of dollars of advertising. Is it true that money talks and we listen? Tomorrow morning the news will recap the winners and losers. Yet on this day as we gather for worship we hear of an alternative kingdom.

The difference seems to be in the gift of the Holy Spirit, not that I can explain how God’s Spirit works, but only that I know that it does. And I don’t have any concrete way to predict how it will occur. All I can say for certain is that Jesus blesses. The nature of God’s rule is to give the kingdom, to console, to provide for, to fill, to support, and to shelter. Do good and not harm. To know God’s favor so intimately that it becomes an expression of one’s way with others.

Slide - beatitudes

The blessed are not merciful because it is to their advantage to act that way or because they want to impress another. Peacemakers are called children of God because they imitate the Prince of Peace. Today, as an alternative to the hype of the day, we lift up those who are meek, and who will inherit the earth.

Jesus is described as one who is gentle and meek, and in being so, he attracts humankind to himself. “Come to me , all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle, (meek), humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Mt. 11:28-30.

“Meek” does not mean shy, weak, or powerless. Rather, the scripture implies the power of self-control against oppressors and antagonists. Jesus was definitely one who showed incredible self-control as he was tempted in the wilderness. The meek live in the power of God to do God’s will; the meek feed off the Spirit and wisdom of God rather than any anger or feeling of reprisal. Jesus spoke of the Word of

God being the very thing which fed him. Christ gathered the world to himself, filled with the power of God and the wisdom of God. As he taught from the mountain he described the way of life of a people gathered by him and around him.

No one is asked to go out and try to be poor in spirit or to mourn or to be meek. Jesus is indicating that given the reality of the kingdom we should not be surprised to find among those who follow him those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, and those who are meek. And Jesus does not suggest that everyone who follows him will possess the whole list of descriptions, but we can be sure that some will be poor, some will mourn, and some will be meek. For the church to be made up of such ones is to make it visible. And to be a disciple is to learn why we are dependent on those who mourn or who are meek, though we may not possess that gift ourselves. It can be a hard lesson to learn.

For followers of Christ who demonstrate this character of God, it shows through their behavior and attitude even in the most tragic of circumstances.

It was thirty years ago when they found Elisa's body on a cold Saturday morning in February a couple of miles from the country church I was serving. She had grown up in a caring, Christian family. They were members of the local Roman Catholic Church. Her last act was to be kind to a man who had driven his vehicle into a ditch on a cold Friday night.

Unfortunately, he had been under the influence of too much alcohol and marijuana for hours that day, he had not been schooled in caring for others but in debauchery, and was frustrated that his plans with his girlfriend had been cut short. Somehow he overpowered Elisa, then assaulted her and strangled her to death. Not long after she was found, he was arrested.

The whole community grieved the loss of Elisa. A family in my congregation was close friends. A community service was to be held in the school auditorium. Besides the priest, one of my Lutheran colleagues was asked to preach. The word was going around that Elisa's parents were forgiving the killer. People voiced their disbelief. How could they offer forgiveness? Others would not be so generous. I, too, wondered at that time how forgiveness could be offered. Didn't they have a right to be angry?

Elisa's parents must have known the forgiveness of God in their own life in a way that I had not at that point in my life. The scripture says, "We love, because God first loves us." The parents showed their inner Christ by imitating forgiveness of the one who was tempted by relied on the wisdom of God. They relied on God's Spirit in a manner that was hidden to me back then.

My friend Noel Kropp addressed this as he preached. He said that day the seeds of forgiveness had been sown. I remember the image of forgiveness as a seed in the ground, that sprouts and grows and reaches maturity in due season. Forgiveness was deeper than one act. Forgiveness defies the ways of the world. It is an alternative to expressions of power over, and retaliation. From some angles it looks weak.

Blessed are the meek, blessed are those who live in the power of God to do God's will. They are committed to show the love of God in human actions and attitudes toward others. They are committed to being an alternative to the ways of the world.

In 2007 the world was surprised again by acts of forgiveness in the face of violence. In October of 2007, one year from the shooting of ten young school girls of the Amish in Nickle Mines, Pennsylvania, Amish families brought money they raised to the widow of the killer and her three young children. This was

yet another act of forgiveness. The first act of forgiveness was in the days after the shooting when the Amish families' attended the burial of the killer in order to embrace and console the widow. Such an act of forgiveness was barely comprehensible as the Amish had just finished burying their own the day before. They wanted to clearly show they live by their values not to hold a grudge.

Such acts can seem foolish and weak to the world which values power over others, but it speaks volumes about the love of God that is known by those who express such forgiveness. They do not simply admire Jesus, but they are committed in such a way that God's Spirit guides their actions and leads them into paths of new life. Jesus creates a people capable of living in accordance with this new order in the midst of the old. That Jesus does this is often hidden to those who are gathered and being created, because one of the great gifts of God is time. God gives God's people time to become the people God creates them to be.

God gathers people around God's word so that a community comes into being like no other community the world has ever seen. It is a community that is mixed in composition. It is a people who have different races, genders, and orientations. It is a mix of religious nature from the most fanatical keepers of the Law to the strongest advocates of justice and freedoms. It is a gathering of those who are easily committed to the one true God and those who are in the process of disentangling their lives from devotion to other things. It is a gathering where rich and poor exist side by side without distinction. It is a community made possible because it is gathered around Jesus' life, which makes it possible for us to be reconciled to God and to one another.

On this day when the world pushes towards winners and losers, when people are tempted to glorify their own greatness and power over others, let us do something alternative. Let us recognize what God is up to in creating us to be a people who are formed in the waters of baptism to be a fountain of life for all who gather here. Let us sing for one another of the blessings of God because we are gathered and shaped by the grace and cross of Jesus. Let us sing for one another so that that world may know that Jesus is more than someone we admire, but someone worthy of following.