“You Are On The Right Road”

11/05/17

Matthew 5:1-12

Remember when you were a kid and someone was going to tell you something important? You would circle up around the person and listen to what they were going to say. Perhaps it was a grandparent that was going to tell you some great long family story. I bet many of you have done that with your grandkids. The story may be completely true or filled with a lot of family lore. It was still part of passing down your family traditions. We just did this same sort of thing with our children’s sermon. We have the children sit here on the steps and tell them a story from the bible. And how it can relate to their lives as they continue to grow. They probably don’t understand it right now, but it is planting that seed of faith.

Sometimes when you sit down to tell your children, your employees or whoever down it may not be good news. Maybe you once had to sit down and tell your children that you and your spouse were getting a divorce. Maybe you had to sit down and tell your children that you have cancer or some other terrible illness. Maybe you had to tell an employee that you had to let them go because of their performance or that they were being laid off. There is just something about when you sit down as the person in power that makes the situation feel very important. You know something big is going to happen.

Then there is the time that you sat around the hospital bed looking for some revelatory words from your loved one that was dying. I had that experience last year about this time. My grandmother was in hospice care. I flew up there to spend about a week with her and the rest of my family. She had been suffering with dementia and she decided that she did not want further treatment. So while sitting at her bedside I was hoping for some great wise words as she was about to depart this world for the next. She had trouble communicating but she could answer yes or no questions. Mostly we were unburdening ourselves and telling her how much she meant to us. There is something very powerful about talking to your loved one for the last time and that is what I was trying to pause and soak in. Eventually she died, but we all had the opportunity to say goodbye and give our thanks for her life. She had the position of power in that moment in her weakest moment.

In our scripture for today it is the beginning of the sermon on the mount. He had just been tempted in the desert by Satan. He called Peter, Andrew, James and John as disciples by the sea of Galilee. He has just started his earthly ministry by preaching the good news and healing sickness among the people. Great crowds have continued to follow him. So Jesus saw the crowds and he headed up to the mountain. As he headed up the mountain, the listener of this story is expected to make the connection to another teacher, Moses, and to another mountain, Sinai. Remember that Jesus is just beginning. He has amassed these huge crowds, and people are trying to figure out who this guy is. He is healing all these people throughout the country side. Is this the messiah? The messiah that they are expecting is to be a warrior messiah. The messiah is going to make heads roll and get rid of the oppressive Roman rule. This messiah should be a hybrid between King David and the prophet Elijah. The crowds see Jesus sit down. Just like when our grandparents sit down to tell us something, this is a seat of power. Something big is going to happen here. From ancient middle eastern custom until now, sitting in a position of power is a big deal. The pope sits in his chair when he is going to say something that is infallible. When a professor is put into a position of power at a university he is endowed to a chair. Not endowed to sit in a chair forever, but chair being the signifier of a position of power.

On his seat on that holy mountain top Jesus was preparing to speak. What is he going to say? That is what the crowd is wondering. They were hoping for a battle cry. This is how things are going to happen. This is what is going to change. Then he says the first line, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. What? What is this guy talking about? He keeps going. Blessed are whoever and they will get or receive whatever. Like Moses, people were looking for Thou Shalt and Thou Shalt Not. All too often, the preacher will try and turn this passage into thou shalts. Thou shalt be merciful and thou shalt receive mercy. Usually that is a good idea, but this list is descriptive not prescriptive. We are not to become people who mourn, we either are in mourning or not. These are people who are looked on with favor by God. It is just the way it is.

Blessed is an odd word to use here. The word in the greek is Marikos. It is a common word in the Bible but hard to translate into English. Our NRSV bible and many others use Blessed. But that sounds unreal. Like when people say that I am so blessed with a new child. I am so blessed with a new home or a lot of money. Doesn’t seem quite right. Other commentators say that happy could work. But happiness can be so fickle. You may be doing something important as a peacemaker, but you might not always be happy about it. You are definitely not happy when in mourning. Another idea is using “greatly honored”. That seems better. The best that I found was translating Marikos as, “You are on the right road.” As in, the pure in heart are on the right road, for they will see God. The poor in spirit are on the right road, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Even with that slight shift in wordage, this list is still shocking.

If these beatitudes describe reality, what reality are they describing? Blessed are the meek! Are you kidding. The meek, they can’t inherit the earth. Here they get left behind and deservedly so. There is just something about that word. I once had a boss call me meek and mild. I had to hold myself back from punching him. Our culture says on the right road are the well educated, for they will be successful. Jesus says, on the right road are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Our culture says, on the right road are those who have great health for all will be well. Jesus says, on the right road are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Our culture says on the right road are those who beat their opponents for they are winners. Jesus says, on the right road are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

This vision of God’s kingdom is radically different than the world that we see ourselves in. These are not something that we are to aspire to. But it calls us to look at people who are in these situations in a new light. Look at those who are humble differently, for they know that pride can sometime take your nowhere. Look at those who are seeking righteousness and justice not as annoyances but as someone looking for a better world. Look at the merciful and see what the power of forgiveness can do. Look at those who are working for peace, not as wimps or unpatriotic, but that they see what war and destruction can do to all of God’s children. Look at those who mourn, not as someone who can’t get on with their lives, but as someone who has lost someone so dear to them.

As today is All Saints Sunday, the one that speaks to today the most is On the right road are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. We mourn this day for all of the people we have lost in the past year. It is our church friends, it is our family, it can be people in the community and in the larger world. We all mourn in different ways. It can be quick. It can be long. It can be painful. It can also be ambivalent. People will tell you all sorts of things when your loved one dies. God needed another angel. At least his suffering is over. At least it was quick. At least, At least, At least. We can feel the pain when some well-meaning person says something that hurts. Sometimes it is better just to say, I am with you. Just as God is with us. Our God is one who is tender with us. Especially when we are in mourning.

Have you noticed how easy it is mourn the true saints of our congregation and our community? I had the pleasure of visiting with George Kostas this week, the priest that you all know well over at Holy Trinity. He is in ill health and was reflecting with me on his life. He found comfort in one of our dear departed saints, Raedeen Queen. Raedeen and George were good friends and he always took comfort in this quote of hers. Raedeen always said, “I thank God for all of my Yesterdays, and I thank God for all of the time I have left.” As he was mourning her death and now his impending death, those words have great meaning for him. He wants to spend all the time he has left to the best of his ability. We all grieve the loss of his health and his decline. He now has found some clarity about how God has used him for good.

What about when the person is not much of a saint? A story from Rev. Roger Talbott in the Christian Century illuminates this. He was serving a church part time while attending seminary. Earth to Earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of the resurrection is what he said while burying a citizen of that small town. A parishioner named Laurence asked Roger to walk around the cemetery with him after the service. In that time, there was no respectful word to describe Laurence as a gay man. That part of him was invisible to Roger and to the congregation. What Roger knew of Laurence was that he was interested in insects and a great gardener. He was the community historian and the church’s organist. He had retired as a security guard. He once taught school in another part of the state. He left that job in the middle of a school year as one person told him in a whisper. Laurence showed Roger the graves of his parents and grandparents. He showed him the graces of a couple who ran the general store until a few weeks before the wife died. The husband followed a few days later. Then the grave of the village atheist, back in the days when each village only had one. The man had spent his life cataloging the contradictions in the bible and when he found no more, he took his own life. They found the grave of a man who worked for a power company in the eastern part of the state. He died by execution for the murder of a little boy who was found not far from where someone saw a power truck parked. Roger wondered how he had been convicted on what seemed like only circumstantial evidence. They visited other graves while Laurence told stories. They had all died as the lawyers would say, “without issue.” “Who will remember them when I am gone?” Laurence pondered, “Who will remember me?”

It is easier to remember the saints and not so for the not so saintly. But on All Saints day we affirm that every life bears the image of God. The image of God is much easier to see in the truly saintly, but it is also true of all lives if we look. When we cannot find the image of God in those who died, we can’t fully proclaim the most important truth of all. That was the truth that Laurence taught Roger as they walked through the cemetery. In remembering those who were despised and forgotten he had become like Christ, who came to seek and save the lost, and who took his place with all souls, including the blasphemer, the executed and those who die without issue. Laurence was embodying one of the vocations of the church. To remember all saints and all souls, always.

As we remember those we lost this year, remember that they were not perfect and either are we. We remember the good and the bad. Where they built us up and when they disappointed us. We cry and we celebrate with God. We are comforted by God. So, who will remember us when we die. This church will! Thanks be to God for all who have gone before us and for all of our lives. Amen.

**Matthew 5:1-12**

**The Beatitudes**

5When 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.