

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Some years back, maybe a year or so after I came to Grace, I remember getting a telephone call here in the office from a woman who was upset at the message we had put on our signs. Now think for a second about what kind of message on a church sign might make you mad. For me it would be the ones you see occasionally in the middle of the summer that say “If you think it’s hot now, wait ‘til you get to Hell.” But you know we wouldn’t put anything like that on our signs. So what then? What do you think upset her? Well, I’ll tell you, it was this: “God cares for the poor.” That was it. You had to keep things short on the non-electronic signs. Why do you suppose that message was problematic for this woman? Was it because she was poor and wasn’t feeling cared for by God? I would understand that kind of call. No, it was because she *wasn’t* poor, and she felt excluded by our message because it focused solely on the poor. There had already been a backlash against the idea that “black lives matter,” which has always mystified me, so I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised by that kind of call. But I was.

I bring up this story because it helps to shed light on our Gospel reading today, the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, better known as the Beatitudes. It’s maybe hard to imagine, but Jesus’ blessing here of the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, the persecuted, and so on would have seemed just as offensive and shocking to those who thought of themselves as good, upstanding people in the first century. But who am I kidding? They are offensive to people today who claim to be Christian. I have heard stories of parishioners taking their pastor to task after hearing a sermon based on the Beatitudes. “Where’d you get that socialist nonsense from, pastor?” And when the pastor told them they were Jesus’ words they said, “well that just doesn’t work anymore.” Here’s the thing, though. There was never a time when the Beatitudes *did* work. They have always been a surprising and difficult teaching. They have always been counter-intuitive and countercultural.

I’ll come back to this in a minute. But first I want to talk about how we got here, up on the mountain with Jesus. Last week we read about Jesus calling his first disciples, the fishermen in the previous chapter of Matthew. But between that text and our text this week is a section we skipped over. After Jesus calls his disciples, and they for some reason immediately leave their nets and follow, he doesn’t begin teaching them. And neither does he set about to recruit soldiers and raise an army, which is what you would think a Messiah would do. You would think that because everyone was expecting the long-promised Messiah to lead a rebellion against the Roman occupiers and their local collaborators, and to reestablish the kingdom of Israel. But Jesus doesn’t do that. Instead, he goes around from town to town, village to village, teaching publicly in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and also healing and casting out demons. A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus in John’s Gospel say to those who would become his disciples, “come and see.” I think that this is Matthew’s version of Jesus’ show and tell. Before he teaches the disciples, he first shows them who he is, where his focus is, what and whom he values.

Now, having done that, he can finally sit down with his new disciples apart from the crowds and begin to teach them specifically. But notice where the focus remains. This teaching is not about the disciples, not until the very end. It is first and foremost about the crowds down below, the folks they’ve been watching Jesus interact with since they were called away from their fishing nets. And as I said earlier, it is not what the disciples, or anyone else, would have expected. “Blessed are the meek, ... the pure in heart, ... the peacemakers, ... the persecuted.” Blessed are exactly the sorts of people that don’t seem like they’re blessed.

I need to pause quickly here and talk about this word “blessed.” It’s a bit misleading. The Greek word underneath it doesn’t imply God’s approval or God’s action like “blessed” does. Some English translations, like the Good News Bible from the 70s, use “happy” instead of blessed. But I learned a possibly even better option this week: “Congratulations.” “Congratulations to the poor in spirit. Good for them. They get the Kingdom of Heaven.” “Congratulations to the meek. They get the land.” “Congratulations to the merciful. They will receive mercy.” However you translate it, it needs to be the kind of thing you think about when you look at Facebook and see how well your friends are doing. “Wow, nice for them that they got to go on that amazing vacation.” It needs to be what you think about when you envy the rich and powerful. “How amazing for them that they get to live in beautiful houses with fantastic views.” Then take that sentiment and apply it to the poor, to those who have lost loved ones, to those who have been wronged, or who see others wronged, and who seek justice. That’s the inversion that Jesus is creating here. He’s evoking what we would call cognitive dissonance in his disciples to help them understand the new thing that God is now doing in Jesus, and how radically different is the Kingdom of Heaven from the kingdoms of this world.

I have one more possibility to help us think about this very familiar text in new and helpful ways. Remember in last week’s texts that Jesus promised to make of his new disciples “fishers of people.” Remember also that James and John were in their boat repairing their nets. Net fishing involves throwing, or “casting” a net that is weighted around the edges over schools of fish so that it sinks down and traps them. Then a line pulls the edges of the net together and traps the fish inside. That’s very different from bait fishing, in which you lure fish with the promise of some food only to catch them on a hook. Consider, then, the possibility that Jesus is not just changing the object of fishing from fish to people, but he is also changing the method from net fishing to bait fishing. You might then think that the disciples have been lured to Jesus with the promise that he is the Messiah, that he is a net fisher who will force people into his new and better kingdom. But now Jesus switches the bait as it were. Now the bait is these crowds of people they’ve been taught to think of as unfortunate, maybe even cursed, only to find them loved and cared for by God. Jesus means, in other words, to hook his disciples by their hearts – but not in a violent or coercive way. The hook is that they come to see the world and the people in it differently. They come to care about and love those whom God cares about and loves. And then they’re caught. But not in a bad way.

Jesus warns, though, that that kind of fishing will be opposed by the net fishers of the world, who attempt to rule by fear and violence and coercion. He warns his disciples that when they take the bait and start to care about and love those whom the world pities, despises, and rejects, they can expect to be persecuted. And they can expect to be lied about by those in power. Maybe you’ve noticed that kind of dynamic in recent world and national events, evil uttered falsely against those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, evil uttered, ironically by those who claim the name of Jesus while sneering at the qualities he continually displayed: compassion, empathy, mercy, and love even for enemies. How contemporary this warning of Jesus feels all of a sudden – how prophetic. And Jesus will be the first to bear the brunt of that persecution. He will be caught up in the net of the powers that be and will endure the worst it can mete out – even death on a cross. But through that death will come resurrection life, the undoing of sin, death, and evil, and a mission of hooking the hearts of all people into a new way of living. So if you are discouraged today, that is to say poor in spirit, if you are grieving the loss of our country’s soul, if you are hungry for righteousness out of compassion and love for those who are being mistreated and marginalized, and those who are killed unjustly for caring about them, well, congratulations! The Kingdom of Heaven is yours. May you trust that it is so, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.