

**February 2, 2020 Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan**  
**Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 5:1-12**

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the fifth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

<sup>1</sup>When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup>“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup>“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup>“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

There’s so much I feel like I need to say today...

It feels like I’m supposed to find a way

to make references to football and maybe groundhogs...

maybe also a shout out to Candlemas for the religion nerds...

and because it’s such a major moment in our society...

probably something about impeachment...

but without being too polarizing...

So I'm just going to now claim to have done all of those things now...

because Scripture today has nothing to do with most of them...

expect of course that it also has everything to do with all of them...

but I will leave those connections mostly to you.

Deal?

On the other hand, it might be the height of hubris to preach a sermon about the greatest sermon ever preached.

Maybe I should stick to football or politics – less controversial.

But the greatest stories and teachings don't wear out.

We can keep coming back to them again and again and again and again... and the well doesn't run dry.

Today, we hear Jesus speak the teaching

that grounds his entire life and work in Matthew's gospel.

The Beatitudes are nothing less than that.

They aren't only beautiful words for embroidery patterns.

They are a manifesto.

They are a declaration of independence

from all the rules that seem to shape the world.

When Jesus preaches these words, he turns off gravity.

Perhaps it helps to understand this

by considering what the gospel writer is showing us

in how they shape the story of Jesus.

They begin with his lineage, and his extraordinary birth...

and also, how his life was threatened as an infant by a powerful ruler...

So he escaped and then emerged out of Egypt to return to save his people.

And then he goes up onto a mountain and delivers a teaching about how life is shaped in the vision of God.

And while this is world-changing and new...  
it should also sound sort of familiar.

Because generations before...there was a child who was born...  
when a frightened ruler was slaughtering male babies.

And so he was hidden in a basket in a river.

Then raised up an Egyptian before answering a call  
to deliver God's people...

eventually going up a mountain to receive a new word  
for how to live...though not just one word...but ten. A Decalogue.

This mountain today is an echo of Sinai...

or, maybe I should say...

Sinai foreshadows this mountain.

Because Matthew wants us to see the shadow of Moses when we see Jesus...

So, also, when we hear the Beatitudes,

we can think of the Ten Commandments –

or as we call them in the Godly Play circle in Sunday School –

God's Ten Best Ways to Live....

another picture of how God envisions our life together...

the heart of God's hopes and dreams for God's people.

It's hard to stress too much how radical a departure these blessings are  
from the blessings conferred by the world.

I don't think we have to go much farther than the first one to feel it.

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

Sometimes Matthew gets some flack

for softening the sharp edges of the Beatitudes,

compared to Luke.

Luke just says, "Blessed are you who are poor...."  
and "blessed are you who are hungry now..."  
instead of Matthew's more poetic,  
"blessed are you who hunger and thirst...for righteousness."

But I wonder if Matthew is really copping out...  
or if he's taking us deeper.  
Because, "blessed are you who are poor" is a hard thing to understand.  
Poverty does not feel blessed.  
Those of us who are or have been poor could speak to this...  
but I know that one story that we tell in this world  
is that there is a difference between being poor and being broke.  
Right?  
Broke is a situation...and poor feels deeper...more like an identity.  
And most of us (I would guess) wouldn't want to be the latter....  
even if we've been former.  
There's less shame in it.

So when Matthew writes, "blessed are the poor in spirit,"  
he might well be saying "blessed are the poor...  
not just the materially poor...not just the folks who are broke today...  
but the people who are poor through and through...  
the ones for whom poverty is an identity...  
an indelible mark...a spiritual experience.  
Blessed are the truly, fully poor."

Here, Jesus is unflinching in the face of the world's shame,  
and claims the shamed ones for blessedness.

Blessed are the ones who are so hungry and thirsty...  
it's not just in their stomachs, it's in their bones and blood and breath.  
They are so hungry that they aren't full until everyone is full.

If you are covered in grief,  
if you are too quiet to claim your space,

to speak up against the ones who take advantage of you,  
if you are so generous of spirit that you always answer with forgiveness  
even when it isn't earned,  
if you are sincere in a world full of fakers,  
if you work for peace in a world built for the cut-throat...

Y'all are God's people.

If you are likely to be thrown out as this world's trash...  
you're going to realize that God builds the kingdom by dumpster diving.  
That place where you've felt the most worthless...  
that's where God walks up and tells you how beautiful you are.

And...whenever we are likely to throw someone else away...  
or deride them...God is likely to walk up to them, too...  
and call them a child of God.

And I'll be honest. I don't know what to do with that.  
Because I really do believe some people are dead wrong.  
I mean so wrong, their wrongness is death-dealing,  
and I don't think God wants anything to do with it.  
And then I have to wrestle with the fact that our God is a God  
who says no to every death-dealing, unloving power in this world...  
and still says to each person,  
"I created you and you are mine. And I have work for you."

That claim and identity is sure...and...  
it is also sure that God asks us to live into it...  
to really be who we really are.

That is what the prophet Micah is telling the people in the time of Hezekiah  
(though...for the history buffs...  
there's some other exilic and reconstructionist stuff rolled in the text...  
so it seems very much like the people passed around  
and chewed on and built on the prophet's words for many generations).

The offering that God desires, Micah makes clear...  
isn't rich things or power...none of the world's best stuff...  
God wants for the people  
who have been given freedom and life by God's own hand  
to want to extend freedom and life and love and justice to others.

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God...

This is the work we are given  
by virtue of our eternal claim to be blessed children of God.  
As children of God's  
we are heirs of the upside-down blessings of the Beatitudes,  
and our job description is love.

Love.

This will look so many different ways for each of us  
at different moments of our life.  
Here, in this place,  
we are excited to be exploring what it could look like  
to more deeply love our neighbors who don't have secure housing.  
As we have been listening to the Holy Spirits leading over the past year,  
we have learned so much about how our city is full of neighbors  
who need to be safer and more surrounded by love and care  
so that they can live into the fullness of God's vision for their lives.  
And, you know what, we aren't able  
to live into the fullness of God's vision for our lives, either,  
while they are still struggling.  
So this last week, we had the first meeting of a new taskforce  
to carry forward to exploration  
of how we can build community more deeply...  
how we can walk in kindness, justice, and humility.

And, like God's people have for generations,

we'll get things wrong along the way...

But God will be there, in this work and all the work that is ahead of us...  
sending us prophets and teachers to remind us who we really are...  
and whose we really are.

Because we belong to the one who loves and heals the world.  
And because that is true, we can do so much more than we know.

Beloveds...Blessed ones...

We have been convened...as Paul describes us in Corinthians...  
a battalion of the weak and foolish...  
like an army with arms full of flowers...  
weeping, weak and hungry...  
unimportant...broken...cast aside...

And we get to link arms with all the other losers...  
and go out with marching orders to heal the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.