

2-1-26 sermon

Micah 6.1-8; Matthew 5.1-12

I'm auditing a class at Union Presbyterian Seminary at the moment. It's an 'Introduction to Reformed Theology' and part of my preparation to sit ordination exams this year. While it's an overview of Reformed systematic theology, I really appreciate something the professor says every week at some point: "Reformed theology is not primarily concerned with theological abstractions but instead flows from the story narrated in the Christian scriptures." She's singing my song when she says that, and makes me feel like there's room for me under the Reformed umbrella!

Rebecca is often reminding me that it's easy to throw around words and expect that everyone understands them, not least our young disciples! So, it might be helpful to define the word 'theology.' It's an English word that represents two Greek words: 'theos' – god and 'logos' – word. So, in English we have biology – the word, or study about 'bios', life. We have anthropology – the word, or study of 'anthropos' – humans. And we have theology – the word, or study of God. The foundation of Christian theology is the Bible, rather than abstract philosophical ideas about who God must be in order to be God. The foundation is the revelation of God in the person of Jesus as found in the bible. So, as someone in the process of becoming a Teaching Elder in the PCUSA, I'm going to spend a little time teaching this morning. Or – more accurately, probably – reminding us of some basics that bear revisiting from time to time. Beginning with the reason we read these particular texts this morning.

The Revised Common Lectionary – which we follow most of the time – has a 3-year cycle. Each year focuses on one of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke, with John's Gospel spread across the three years. We are in Year A, and in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew is one of the synoptic Gospels. The English word 'synoptic' is derived from two Greek words: 'syn,' which means "with" and 'optic,' which means "eye." So, 'synoptic' means, "with the same eye." We describe Matthew, Mark and Luke as being written "with the same eye" because they contain a great deal of the same material, in contrast to the Gospel of John, which reads very differently. A reasonable question to ask, then, is "why do we have three Gospels all kind of telling the same story?" The simple answer is, "Because each author was writing for a different audience." Each has different emphases, and so, each author arranges the shared material accordingly.

Matthew is writing for a predominantly Jewish audience, and so is emphasizing Jesus' connection to the narrative of the Hebrew bible. He's trying to persuade his Jewish audience that Jesus is indeed the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. We noted *that* during the season of Advent, when we heard Matthew introduce Jesus in his genealogy as, "The Messiah, the son of Abraham, the son of David." In the following three chapters he invites his audience to compare Jesus to Moses, the great Lawgiver of Israel, who addressed his people just before his death with these words:

“The Lord said, ‘I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.’”

Moses is the one who led Israel to make that first covenant with God at Mount Sinai, and now Matthew is introducing Jesus to his audience as the one bringing a *new* covenant. Moses led his people out of Egypt, passing through the waters of the Red Sea, leading them into the wilderness, eventually arriving at the border of the Promised Land, where God lists a series of blessings and curses that would come upon them depending on whether or not they were obedient to the covenant. Now Matthew invites us to compare Jesus to Moses, by basically telling that same story in chapters two to four of his Gospel. It begins with Jesus coming out of Egypt (where his family had fled to avoid Herod’s troops), then passing through a body of water in his baptism, then entering the wilderness, where he is tempted by the Adversary. And now we read that “he went up the mountain,” to announce God’s *new* covenant in a series of blessings, the “beatitudes.” Here is the new Moses, says Matthew, bringing a different kind of liberation, sitting down to teach the Law, announcing a new covenant.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with what we call “the beatitudes.” Named as such because many bible translators have chosen the word ‘blessed’ as the English translation of the Greek word, ‘*makarios*’. These are some of the most well-known words of scripture. I can only imagine how many sermons have been preached on them, how many books written about them. I remember Robert Schuller – he of Crystal Cathedral fame – publishing his sermon series in book form, which sold over 1.5 million copies! The title is “The Be Happy Attitudes,” sub-titled, “Eight positive attitudes that can transform your life.” Suggesting, “Do these things that Jesus taught, and you’ll be living the good life.” I suspect that many people read the beatitudes as instruction. That they’re prescriptive – things we ought to do or be. Because we want to be blessed, right? So, Jesus – the new Moses – kicks off his teaching with this heroic ethic: “Be poor in spirit... mourn... be willing to be persecuted... Be willing to be reviled, have people speak all kinds of evil things against you... And you’ll be blessed!” Not quite the “be happy” attitudes perhaps, but still attitudes to adopt. But is that really what Jesus is saying, though? “Try hard to live like this, and you’ll be blessed?” Are they *prescriptive*? Or are they *descriptive*? Are they an exhortation to try to be all these things? Or are they a statement *about* all these things? Is Jesus saying, “*If* you do these things, you *will* be blessed?” Or is he saying, “You *are* blessed if you experience these things?” It shouldn’t come as a surprise to you for me to say I think they’re *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*, primarily because of the story in which they’re rooted.

If Jesus is the new Moses, then this is the announcement of a new covenant, not a heroic ethic by which to live. The only way it can become an ethic – a series of attitudes we are to adopt – is if they’re abstracted from the one who taught them. For the one who preaches the sermon is the Messiah, the Son of God. And the sermon is the reality of the new age that has begun with Jesus. That the Kingdom of heaven has drawn near in him.

“And,” Jesus says, “it’s like this.”

But if this is indeed *descriptive*, it rings hollow at first glance, right? Because those who mourn often go *uncomforted*. The meek don't always inherit the earth – the earth is often stripped from them. Those who show mercy don't always receive mercy in return. Those who long for justice – who *strive* for justice – often take that longing to the grave. So what exactly are the beatitudes descriptive of? Again, we return to the story, and what they describe is life in the new covenant. Life in this 'kingdom of heaven' that Jesus has begun to proclaim and to embody. Later in the sermon he'll teach his disciples to pray in the words we'll pray during the communion liturgy later this morning: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The life of heaven – the life of the realm where God is sovereign – is to become the life of the world, transforming the present earth into the place of beauty and delight that God always intended for it to be. Those who follow Jesus are to begin to live in that reality in the here and now, and this sermon lays out the groundwork of what that will involve. But again – as we read the sermon in its entirety – if we're supposed to *do* all these things then it just becomes a heroic individualistic ethic. If it's prescriptive, then who on earth can live like that?!

Moses didn't stand before *just* a collection of individuals, read the Ten Commandments and say, "Do your best to keep these!" No, the Ten Commandments were the basis of the covenant that God made with those people, so that they would become a *community* that was profoundly different than the Egyptians, and the Hittites, and all the other nations around them. So the *new* Moses, Jesus, addresses the sermon to the community that is beginning to form around him, and this sermon is the constitution of a people living by this *new* covenant, and the demands of the sermon leave us saying, "There's no way I can do all this!" To which Jesus might respond, "Exactly! That's the point. The sermon is intended to make you learn to depend upon God – and upon one another to live this way." Under a new covenant with God, that will form a new kind of people, and the beatitudes in some ways function as the key to all that follows. Because they're not prescriptive. They're not recommendations.

No one is being asked to go out and try to be poor in spirit or to mourn or to be meek. Rather, Jesus suggests that given the reality of the new covenant – of God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven – we shouldn't be surprised to find among those who follow Jesus those who are poor in spirit. Those who *do* mourn, those who *are* meek. We're not all going to experience all the beatitudes describe. But we can be sure that some of us will be poor in spirit. Some will be meek, some will mourn. Some will be pure in heart. Some will be peacemakers. And, yes, some will be persecuted. Some will even be reviled. If we are people of the new covenant, gathered around Jesus, then we can expect to find all these things happening among us. That is what it means to be blessed. Not *because* these things are happening to us – that would almost be grotesque. No, it's because of what those things signify: that we belong to Christ, and we belong to each other.

As people of the new covenant, as people who pray together, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we should expect to find people in our midst who experience the things Jesus describes, for they describe what Jesus himself *was* and what

he experienced. And as his people – as the community of the new covenant – we too will experience these things, together. Not individually – but as a people. And *that* is why we are blessed. So no, I don't think these are the “be happy attitudes.” Nor are they heroic ethics we strive to achieve as individuals. They are descriptive of the life of those who follow the way of Jesus *together*. Those who participate in the *new* covenant. Those who belong to Christ – and to each other.

The prophet Micah proclaimed the word of the Lord to God's people Israel, who are crying out to God for deliverance from their latest oppressors, and God reminds them of their story, of all that God has done for them. Then Micah – probably echoing some of what the people are saying – cries out, “What shall I offer the Lord? A heroic offering? Thousands of rams, ten thousands of rivers of oil? My firstborn child?” And the response is, “God has told you what is good: and what does God require of you, but to do justice, to love mercy – or kindness – and to walk humbly with your God.”

This has been a hard week. Certainly the weather has made it so. But so has all that fills our news. If you find yourself mourning for the state of our nation, for the state of the world, then you belong to Christ. And you belong to us.

If you are meek, feeling like you have little if anything to offer, that you have little power to change that which is so profoundly wrong, then you belong to Christ. And you belong to us.

If you hunger and thirst for righteousness, if you are merciful in the face of so much cruelty and violence, then you belong to Christ. And you belong to us.

If you are pure in heart. A peacemaker in the face of human conflict – whether between individuals or between nations – then you belong to Christ, and you belong to us.

If you are persecuted for righteousness' sake, reviled and spoken of falsely for daring to speak truth to power, to name the evil things that are being done as what they are – and not least for daring to do so on social media – then you belong to Christ. And you belong to us.

If you endeavor to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God, then you belong to Christ, and you belong to us.

Blessed, as a member of the way of Jesus.

Amen, and amen.