

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain” (Matthew 5:1). That was the first verse in today’s gospel. At first glance, it seems like a transitional statement to get us to a place for Jesus to teach. However, real estate agents have taught us that location matters. A location provides or limits access to resources which often communicates value. So too, a location can reveal something about identity, including someone’s socio-economic status or their values. And, when Jesus went up on that mountain, it was more than a transitional sentence.

You see, with this movement, Jesus mirrored the actions of Moses. And, as you may remember, Moses was a key figure in the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses is, probably, best known for the biblical story of Exodus where the enslaved Israelites were freed from the Egyptians, and then, the Israelites wandered in the desert where Moses, eventually, went to the top of Mount Sinai. On top of that mountain, Moses saw God face-to-face and received the Ten Commandments.

Matthew’s author has emphasized the similarity between Jesus and Moses a number of times before today’s reading. After all, Jesus suffered under an oppressive ruler, just like Moses. Jesus’s life was threatened as a child, just like Moses. Jesus came out of Egypt to follow God’s call, just like Moses. Jesus had a transformational experience in a river, just like Moses. And, Jesus climbed up a mountain to share God’s word with the people, just like Moses.

You see, location matters. Today's location reveals a deep connection between Jesus and Moses. And, even in this location we see that connection in our stain glass windows. While most of the images reflect Jesus's ministry, the only image from the Hebrew Scriptures is the one with Moses and the Ten Commandments. For, as Dr. Eric Barreto puts it, "[in today's gospel,] we learn that Jesus' teaching is not innovation but a vibrant recalling of tradition. [...] These are not new commandments so much as echoes of ancient visions of God's hopes."¹

But, what exactly did Jesus say, and by extension, what did Moses say, and in summary, what does God say? It's easy to believe that the beatitudes, that is all these blessed statements are conditions that we need to meet to grasp God's blessing. It's tempting to be shamed by these beatitudes because we do not always embody the peace, mercy, and hunger for justice that they, and all of the Hebrew Scriptures, value.

For some of us, we look in the mirror and we're so darn hard on ourselves. We can easily see the ways we *didn't* care for God's creation. We can find the ways we *didn't* love another. We notice the ways we failed to show God's mercy. We are more critical of ourselves than anyone else. We hear the voice inside our head tells us that we parent poorly, that we aren't intelligent enough, that we're not skinny or muscular enough, that we're too old or too young, that our skin is too dark or not dark enough, or that our physical or psychological history has made us inadequate. We come to believe that we are not enough. And, these beatitudes only help to intensify our inadequacies.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4367

But what if today's gospel reading isn't about showing us where we've fallen short? What if Jesus is speaking *to* our vulnerabilities? What if, as Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber suggests, "the beatitudes aren't about a list of conditions we should try and meet to be blessed? [...] what if it's performative?... meaning the pronouncement of blessing is actually what confers the blessing itself?"² In other words, what if Jesus climbed up on that mountain to teach us, to liberate us, to change us with a reminder that we are beloved? Could it be that simple?

For me, it was a phone call. When the phone rang, I had recently come out to myself and a few close friends. And, being anything but straight in the church and also desiring to have a life partner was a suicide mission. To be a queer leader in the church meant living a double life or rejecting who God made you to be. However, I had recently become a member of a congregation that had an out, gay single pastor and an out, lesbian pastor with a partner and children. It was a transformational place for me. It was a place where people were working live out all the hopes and dreams from today's first reading from Micah. They were working for justice. They were welcoming, loving, and accepting all people. They were striving to do the ridiculously hard work of walking with (not in front of or behind) our God. This congregation inspired me. So, I submitted my application for seminary. And, I wasn't convinced that seminary was the right path, and frankly, I wasn't sure I'd get in. After all, I was transparent in my application that I was not straight; later on, I'd call myself gay, but at that point I just knew I was crooked. Anyway, I got that phone call, and it was from the director of admissions. The director told me that the committee had reviewed my application and they were impressed with my application. As she was talking, I kept waiting for the "but." You know the "but" statements— it's the moment when

² <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/11/some-modern-beatitudes-a-sermon-for-all-saints-sunday/>

someone something nice but then interjects a “but” we’re going a different direction. So, I was on the phone waiting for the “but” to drop, and she said, “*And* we’d like to offer you a full tuition scholarship.” I was waiting for the “but”— something like “offer you full tuition, but you’re crooked,” “full tuition, but you were raised in a different faith tradition,” “full tuition, but…” The thing is, she never said “but.” After that conversation, I started to tear up. In that moment, God, through that person, called me blessed. I was shocked. Me—this crooked 20-something know-nothing, blessed? Me—this queer person who had very little chance of actually being ordained. They saw gifts in me?

And, you see, that’s the power of the beatitudes. For those on the margins and for those who don’t often hear themselves named as blessed, naming it matters. To name it, means to enact it. To name it, brings about change for the one named and the one who names it. To name it, brings about the kingdom of heaven.

And, you see, that doesn’t mean that others are *not* blessed. It just means that those on the margins sometimes need a little more acknowledgement that they are loved, cherished, and supported because the world so often says they’re a liability, a problem, or not right. So, to say something like “black lives matter,” acknowledges that those who aren’t often publicly recognized as important are, indeed, blessed. And, saying “we welcome the LGBTQIA+ community,” doesn’t mean we don’t welcome straight people, it just says that for so long church and queer people were separate like oil and water. And, to say “we’re in an ‘Immigrant Welcoming Congregation’ doesn’t mean we don’t welcome those with a long history as a U.S. citizen, it just means that the world we live in doesn’t name the value refugees, asylum-seekers, and immigrants.

You see, with all these things and with all of Jesus' beatitudes, God didn't say that *only* the pure in heart, or those who are merciful or those who enact peace through non-violence, or those who work for justice, are the *only* people who are blessed. After all, those are all important things for our faith, but what Jesus did say was that being pure of heart in a world of deceit doesn't always come with acknowledgement and blessing. So, Jesus stood on that mountain to communicate God's word, just like Moses, and to remind us of our God-given identity. To remind us that each and every one of us is blessed, even, and perhaps most importantly, in those moments where we strive to love God and our neighbor as ourselves but we don't often feel like we are blessed. Jesus stood on that mountain to help us recognize that, in this world where people are fearful of people of Chinese descent, that those of Chinese descent are seen as blessed by God, loved by God, and valuable to God. Jesus stood on that mountain to help us see those impacted by the new travel bans in Nigeria, Kyrgystan, and Myanmar, to help us see that they, too, are blessed in God's sight. Because when we start realizing the value that God gives to all people, then we might be transformed.

Alright, I need to stop because I could keep going for another hour, but I won't. So, for now, I'll leave us here. I'll leave us with the reminder that Jesus's message is God's consistent message—a message from way, way back to the time of Moses and before. For our God always views all people, especially the ones that aren't often called blessed, and names them as beloved. And when we witness God's pronouncement of beloved-ness on another, then, perhaps, we might begin to embrace their beloved-ness and slowly begin to recognize the kingdom of heaven in this place. For, you are blessed; you are loved; and you are seeing the kingdom of heaven unfolding before your eyes. What a gift. Amen.

