

Title: Becoming A Spiritual Genius
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First Presbyterian, Kirkwood
Texts: John 10.1-10 Matthew 5.1-9
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Matthew 5 (NRSV)

⁵ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then 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.

When I served a church in Racine, Wisconsin, we were fortunate to live a hundred yards or so from Lake Michigan. As one of the largest bodies of fresh water in the world, the lake – as you might imagine –had a huge influence on the weather around it. It was always a bit cooler near the lake in the summer, and a bit warmer in the winter. Lake-effect snow could dump three times more snow at home than fell at the church just a few miles to the west. And, Oh the fog! When air temperature and water temperature were at odds, the fog was thick, and could last for days.

Our little neighborhood was a mile south of the Wind Point lighthouse; a beautiful relic of pre-electronic navigation...At 108 feet tall, the rotating light shines 24 miles out in the lake; and then there is the foghorn! As soon as the fog rolled in, the foghorn began to blow; day and night, every 45 seconds or so...using its voice to sound the warning which the fog-diffused light no longer could. Really thick fog would often distort the sound of the horn, making one horn blast seem farther away, and the next one right on top of you. Wind direction and strength would also play tricks with the horn blast. But even with these tricks it was hard to lose the direction of the foghorn, for its voice had a clarity and an urgency with which other sounds simply could not compete.

I was reminded of the Wind Point foghorn when I started preparing for this sermon by reading through today’s lesson from the Gospel of John. When Jesus’ voice is turned on, when he is speaking, I can, like the sheep he describes, orient myself to him, because his voice speaks with clarity and urgency, and is so insistent, and so commanding. I want us to hold in our minds an image of fog and the sound of a foghorn...we’ll circle back to these things in a bit.

Here at the beginning of a new year, we've been exploring what the abundant life of Jesus suggests for faithful living. I believe Jesus' invitation to his first disciples to live abundantly, remains suggestive for we 21st Century disciples about what our lives – together and apart – could and should look like. Jesus' words demonstrate how we disciples can embrace and utilize emotional and spiritual and even physiological tools for faithfully abundant living. And as we conclude our brief exploration of some of the spiritual tools useful to us for living with greater wisdom in 2022, I want us to consider how each of us can and will become a spiritual genius! It has a nice ring to it, doesn't it...this title of spiritual genius? It almost sounds like the search for something unattainable –like the knowledge sought by the scarecrow in The Wizard of Oz. But I believe that each of us – if we put our minds and our hearts to it –can become the kind of spiritual genius the world needs right now!

To better understand the idea of spiritual genius, we first need to consider what it means to have wisdom. Wisdom is ultimately not a discipline which we can study and learn and perfect. Instead, wisdom is an approach to living that opens our hearts and minds to a way of being that is far beyond, and far more useful, than the instinctual/survivalist capacities with which we are born.

Early in his life Albert Einstein had 'profound faith in the social good of science'. Science could and was making life better for all people. But then, as he watched fellow German scientists hand over the power of science by creating weapons of mass destruction for the Nazi's, Einstein came to believe that the qualities of 'spiritual genius', which he associated with individuals like Gandhi, Moses, Jesus, Buddha, and St. Francis of Assisi--that these genius qualities were "more necessary to the future of human dignity, security, and joy, than any objective knowledge."

Krista Tippet, NPR broadcaster, and author of *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry Into the Mystery and Art of Living*, declares that in her experience Spiritual Geniuses are not as rare as those suggested by Einstein, but that Spiritual Geniuses are everywhere. "They are," says Tippet, in the margins and do not have publicists. They are below the radar.....". They are the ones who pay attention to the "abundance of beauty and courage and grace that fills our world." Spiritual geniuses, concludes Tippet, "create transformative, resilient new realities by becoming transformed, resilient people." Pp4-5)

Our John lesson focuses on Jesus as the 'spiritual geniuses to whom we have pledged ourselves. He is our guide and teacher in the way of wisdom. An important task for us as disciples is listening for the voice of Jesus...listening as individual disciples; listening as a community or congregation of disciples; listening for direction; listening for how to live guided by holy purposes and priorities. To push the image which Jesus offers here...in a time when there are so many distractions...in a time when there are numerous competing voices bidding us to follow them for economic, or political, or personal, or spiritual gain...in a time when daily living is fraught with complexities –like covid, and information overload, and rapid change to what has been familiar, and uncertainty that easily leans into fearfulness...in such a time as this, it is easy for us to become confused about the direction of God's future and the direction in which we need to be go in order to be moving toward God's future.

It's like we're caught up in, and lost in, the midst of a thick fog...a fog which keeps the direction we need to go hidden from us, creating within us a sense of uncertainty in which we easily become paralyzed...afraid of moving in a wrong direction, a deadly direction, and unfaithful direction. But there in the fog of our paralysis, Jesus speaks with clarity and urgency...promising that he will be the wise voice, the trusted voice which we can follow, which we can follow if we will but listen for him and move toward his voice even in the fog of our fearfulness.

Our Matthew lesson offers us a list of best spiritual genius practices. These are habits and qualities we are invited to embrace and practice afresh in 2022 and beyond! What is it about the beatitudes that make them the habits and the practices which a spiritual genius embraces? I see three qualities. You may see others.

First, beatitudes remind us that receiving God's "blessing" is the reward for our embracing spiritual genius practices. We don't work at being a spiritual genius for the money or the prestige or the power. Instead, we seek to be and become a spiritual genius, because this is what God has created us for and because such behavior on our part brings God glory and builds up God's Beloved Community on earth just a little bit more, and when all of us work to increase God's Beloved Community, our little bits quickly add up into something significant!

Second, beatitude-induced behaviors that create blessing are rooted in honesty and integrity. When we mourn, when we show mercy, when we desire righteousness, when we work for peace –in all these ways, in all these moments, we are being honest about the state of our heart. We're not trying to pull a fast one over on God or anyone else by pretending to be someone we are not, or by trying to hide how we are feeling mentally and spiritually.

And, third, beatitude-induced behaviors that create blessing are communally focused. We don't engage in behaviors of blessing just for ourselves and the sake of our personal faithfulness. We participate in behaviors of blessing on behalf of each other in our community, and on behalf of all God's children everywhere. Being and becoming a spiritual genius is about emptying ourselves of all our wants and desires so that we can focus all our energy, all our spiritual gifts, all our resources, all our love on others – just like Jesus did for us.

Being a genius at anything is more than we can grasp on most days. But being a spiritual genius, who makes a difference for others, who makes a difference to the world. Being a spiritual genius is totally possible when we dare to listen to the voice of Jesus. Like a horn that cuts through all the fear and confusion of a thick fog...the voice of Jesus comes to us with clarity and urgency. The voice of Jesus invites us to follow, and never be lost, and become a genius in compassion and love and grace on behalf of others.

For our spiritual homework this week, let us continue to practice our listening skills...listening especially for the voice of Jesus, while letting the beatitudes be the actions we practice as we follow Jesus into God's future.

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Krista Tippet, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*.