

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz
“Having Enough Humility”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, April 11, 2021

Exodus 19:1-7

At the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.’ So, Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him.

Matthew 4:23-5:3

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So, his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

During the season of Easter, the time between Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday, a total of 50 days-- during this season, we're going to explore various pieces of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount found in chapters five, six, and seven of the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus offers us this homiletic masterpiece immediately after *The Beginner's Guide to His Life*, which Matthew provides in the gospel's first four chapters. In this beginner's guide, we learn where Jesus came from, who he is, how he fulfills prophecy, how he relates to righteousness, how he submits to John the Baptist, how he fights the devil, and we also learn the difference that baptism makes in one's life. Then building upon this foundation, Jesus uses the Sermon on the Mount to describe the core values upon which he seeks to build the kingdom of heaven on earth. The kingdom of Heaven, which in an attempt to be more inclusive and following the language of Martin Luther King Jr., I call God's beloved community. This community is the embodiment of God's heavenly realm, becoming an earthly reality. Additionally, the community principles outlined in this sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, guide and shape everything else in Matthew's gospel. Because these ideas are so foundational to Jesus' identity, to Jesus' purposes and priorities because of their foundational nature, they are vitally important to the church that has grown and developed in Jesus' name over the past 2,000 years.

And as church members and disciples, these core values and guiding principles are in turn vital to us. I recently attended a baptism at an Episcopal church for the infant son of a former colleague. Following good COVID protocols, there were eight of us in total, including the one to be baptized. And we were in a small side chapel off the main sanctuary where there was a door propped open for plenty of fresh air. While we were waiting for the service to start, the four-year-old brother of the soon-to-be-wetted one-- this four-year-old invited me to join him in the sanctuary because there was an echo. As we stepped through a door from chapel to sanctuary, my young friend immediately shouted his name at the top of his lungs and then giggled as his voice reverberated around the cavernous space. This memory came to mind as I pondered Jesus' mountaintop sermon because it is an echo of another famous sermon in scripture, scripture loves to echo other scripture, almost as much as a four-year-old loves to echo.

In our Exodus lesson, which Karen read for us a few moments ago, God preaches to Moses on Mount Sinai in the early days of Israel's flight from Egypt, setting the tone and laying out the core values upon which the relationship between God and God's people, Israel, is to be built. Jesus's echoing of God's conversation with Moses at the beginning of His public ministry, is a declaration that we must listen to carefully and take seriously what Jesus says in the sermon that is to follow. His words

He declares, by His echoing the Exodus lesson. His words are forever foundational to our faith.

As the sermon begins, we receive two important pieces of information. First, Jesus takes a seat, which is the traditional pose from which a Jewish rabbi teaches. What we are about to hear must be learned, must be internalized, must be memorized, because it charts our way forward in faith. And the second thing we learn is that the primary audience of learners are the disciples of Jesus. This lesson is designed for disciples, disciples who are to be active listeners, those who ask questions, those who seek clarification, those who raise objections, those who never check their minds at the door, those who seek to make a difference with the information that the teacher provides, which means that we, who are today's disciples, must listen to this sermon carefully and must engage Jesus, our teacher, fully. And then we must get busy making God's beloved community a reality.

Jesus begins the lesson with a series of beatitudes, which most simply put, are blessings. This form of blessing has a long history of use in the Hebrew scriptures and so functions as an echo of scripture within an echo of scripture. Blessings imply divine involvement. A blessing comes from God but doesn't just stop with us as if it is a possession to hoard. A blessing from God always comes with the responsibility to echo it, the responsibility to pass it on for the benefit of others. For if a blessing is not appreciated and is not used, God's purposes and priorities are not advanced, God's beloved community is not realized, and the blessing is wasted. The first beatitude, the first blessing Matthew offers us, is as follows: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It is important that we understand here that poor in spirit does not equal weak in faith, and that it also does not mean to be conceited or prideful. New Testament scholar Amy Jo Levine says it best, I think. She says poor in spirit is a synonym for the people who have enough humility that they do not operate from a sense of pride. Let me repeat that because I think it's really important. Poor in spirit is a synonym for the people who have enough humility that they do not operate from a sense of pride. The poor in spirit are those who recognize that they are both the beneficiaries of help from others and part of a system in which they are to pay it forward and help those whom they can.

The poor in spirit are those who do not sit around saying, look at what I've accomplished, or worse, feeling resentful because they have not received what they consider to be sufficient honor. They know they did the right thing. They know God knows that. And that's sufficient recognition for them indeed. To expand upon this notion a bit, the poor in spirit are those who see what most others do not. And they are blessed because God has gifted them with a broad vision of community, a vision which compels them to act. To put this idea more in today's terms, today's terms, the poor in spirit, are those who are aware of their own privilege. And because of this awareness, they work diligently to help others who do not have, who do not know the same benefits as privileged disciples. Let us be humble listeners here.

The Sermon on the Mount also echoes the story of creation with which the Bible begins. In the beginning of his ministry, Jesus lays out the creation of a new movement, a new way of existing for his disciples. Jesus is putting into motion a new order, a new family, a new community, providing in words, in the words and images of the sermon, the parameters and guidelines by which this new creation needs to exist. Jesus is telling his disciples. He is telling us this is how you should live. This is what it looks and feels like to live in God's beloved community. When disciples can realize their interdependence, we on others and others on us, then we can see with great clarity how we are already blessed.

Here in this season of Easter, we are invited, I believe, to bask in and reflect upon the gift of resurrection. This gift is not for us to possess individually, but it is given to all disciples everywhere for the common good. And through us, the life giving power of resurrection is to become a gift for all people everywhere. With this in mind, I'd like to invite us to be about some particular spiritual homework this week.

I believe we should work on the invitation Jesus extends in the first beatitude, that of continually seeking to become humble, of continually seeking to be someone that others rely on, of continually seeking to be one who is in turn, not afraid to rely on others. The interdependence which Jesus invites us to embrace and practice and model is what the kingdom of Heaven, God's beloved community looks like and feels like. Such interdependence is a blessing to all who live this way and a blessing to all who exist around them.

The Sermon on the Mount echoes God's never-ending love for all of creation including you, including me. Like excited 4-year-olds, let's go and shout about the blessing of this love everywhere with our voices. And let us shout about the blessing of this love, especially with our actions. And then, then most importantly, let us giggle with joy as God's love reverberates all around.

And now using the words found in our bulletins, let us join in the affirmation of faith, affirming some of what we believe.

We believe in God, who has created and who is creating, who has dreamed all that is into being, who is the heartbeat of creation. We believe in God, the Trinity together, the maker Redeemer Sustainer, who constantly shows us the way to become

who we were created to be, who is perfect community and the root of all that is, who is our refuge, our joy, our strength. We believe that God values us and challenges us to bring the world into inclusive community, and that God brings justice to all and calls us to friendship. We believe in the beloved community of God, that we and all creation are God's family and so are interdependent. Each part is necessary to the whole. If one part suffers or is shut out, the beloved community is not fully realized. We believe that in the face of God's love, our call is to face the truth and not to live a lie, to live authentically, to accept ourselves, and to fulfill our potential through enabling others to do the same. We are called to abundant life, always moving forward toward God's future and never hearkening back; for God never restores, but always makes new. Amen.