

A Shocking Inaugural

A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr

One of my favorite parables by Søren Kierkegaard is about the man who escapes from the insane asylum. He gets over the wall and realizes he is free. And so he says to himself, "I need to think of something true to say to people when I meet them, so they don't think I'm crazy and put me back in the insane asylum." So he thinks and he thinks... "Aha! I know something to say that is definitely true." And so he goes into the village and enthusiastically says to everyone he meets, "The earth is round! The earth is round!" And of course they all think he's crazy and throw him back in the insane asylum.

Kierkegaard was trying to make the point that *truth always has a context*. And so I come to you with humility today because I just got off a plane from Paris, France where I've been living for the past 8 years. I'm not sure what has happened, but I know the United States context has changed significantly. I'm still perplexed by what some scholars are calling a "post-truth culture" and "alternative facts." Like many of you, I'm trying to figure out what it means to follow Jesus in this new social, religious and political context.

In fact, Jesus doesn't make things easy for us. There is news and "fake news" coming out of Washington, but the real shocker is Jesus' Galilean inaugural address. That's what his famous "sermon on the mount" really is, you know. It's his declaration of *the way it's going to be* in the Kingdom when he is Commander-in-Chief. As familiar as the sermon on the mount is, if what Jesus says is true, it will be disorienting and subversive to the status quo, and challenging to the way we live as disciples of Jesus in today's world!

In the previous chapter of the gospel according to Matthew, we learned about the call of the disciples. Matthew then notes that Jesus was getting quite a reputation throughout "all Syria..." "Great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan." Those are important facts about context, because when Matthew writes "When Jesus *saw the crowds...*" we know that he saw an extremely diverse, multi-ethnic, and presumably inter-faith audience. This is key to understand what Jesus means when he is talking about those who are blessed.

Jesus probably saw in "the crowd" many people who would never be seen in the Jewish synagogue; people who were outside the faith; some broken by life and who had given up on God. The religious assumption of the day, remember, was that if life was going well, you were blessed by God, but if life was hard, then you were cursed by God. Even today, many religious people assume that if life is going well, God is blessing you, but if life is full of hardship and suffering, then you need to get right with God. Jesus saw those people in the crowds, those Syrians, those Samaritans, the sick, the possessed and dispossessed, the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (and justice - the word for righteousness and justice is exactly the same word in Greek: δικαιοσύνη), the pure in heart and those who pursue peace and justice... Jesus saw these people and he went up the mountain and told his disciples, "You know what? Those folks are blessed, because I see them and love them. God sees them and loves them. In my kingdom they will be welcome, they will be comforted, they will be included and satisfied. They will see God and be called beloved children of God.

The vision presented here has everything to do with who God affirms and draws into the Kingdom of heaven. It is a disorientating (if not crazy?) vision of the priorities that Jesus has for how we are to relate with one another and to whom we will reach out and welcome into his community. It is the vision of God's community which we must keep fixed in our sights if we are to call ourselves *Christian community*!

In our secondary lectionary text, we learn the prophet Micah was sensitive to injustices of the political and religious rituals of his day, the emphasis in practices of holiness which produced a community of hierarchy and prejudice. Micah saw those who considered themselves to be holy in God's eyes to be perpetrators of a community of hypocritical exclusion and alienation, a social system which produced *insiders* and *outsiders*.

The Lord spoke through Micah to remind the people of God's saving acts, "I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery..." But the people focused on the empty practices of religious holiness and national greatness, at the expense of relational kindness. Micah ponders for us, "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? ... Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? ... He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but *to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*"

Prejudice, harshness, and arrogance were the characteristics of the believing community. But justice, kindness, and humility before God is the prophet's alternative vision... We know that Jesus' summary of the law is to love God and love your neighbor

as yourself. Any Jewish rabbi will tell you Micah 6:8 is a good summary of the law. They're saying the same thing. As Cornell West once said, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

The emphasis of Micah's vision for God's people is more sharply focused in Jesus' sermon on the mount. "The crowd" was a term to describe the common, nameless people who would never have any special place in the halls of fame, power, or prestige. "The crowd" is New Testament code language for those typically on the fringe of the mainstream, the outcasts and untouchables of society.

Last year I did a funeral for Jürgen, a German medical doctor who started to come to our worship services a few years ago. It was the largest funeral I have ever done. I mention it because our sanctuary was standing room only with gay men. You see, Jürgen had been the go-to doctor during the AIDS crisis back in the 70's-80's in Paris, and so hundreds showed up to show appreciation and respect. All I could think about as I looked out at that crowd, was "Where was the church for these men?" I just never saw them before!

This week our church had a gala event for community groups, and I met a gentleman who leads an *Alcoholics Anonymous* group. He said he was drinking as many as a bottle of vodka a day thirty years ago, but he came to a meeting at the church, and stopped drinking. He said he has been helping others achieve sobriety one day a time for the last thirty years. And I thought of the crowd of people who are part of AA meetings around the world. Do we see them?

We have in our congregation refugees from Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan and a variety of African countries. I didn't think about refugees much until they started meeting with me face to face and sharing their stories over coffee. 60 million refugees in the world, about half of whom are children. Do we see them? There have been recent crowds in Washington and around the world, some for and some against something...Every community is different, but be sure of this: there is "the crowd" in every community.

The point is this. As followers of Jesus, we are called to start seeing "the crowd" in the same way Jesus sees the crowd. And we are called to care about them, whether we agree with them or not. But we simply cannot care about them until we learn to see them as Jesus sees them.

There is a subtle but important shift in Jesus' sermon in verse eleven. In verses 1-10 he is talking about how blessed are those people (the poor in spirit, the mourners, the hungry, etc.)... But then I imagine he paused, and then looks at his disciples and he says, "Blessed are *you* when people revile *you* and persecute *you* and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely *on my account*. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." You see, Jesus promises a special blessing to those who have a relationship with him, to those who have a commitment to him as his followers, to those who will speak and act in his name in the ministry of peacemaking and reconciliation. Jesus indicates he *expects* his disciples to dare to speak up, to act up for "the crowd" and for the values of his Kingdom.

To be honest, this makes me feel poor in spirit. So now it's time to share my favorite summary of the gospel with you. "Cheer up! Your situation is far worse than you could ever imagine! But cheer up, God's love for you is far greater than you could ever hope!"

Perhaps we need to understand that we are blessed when we recognize our own insufficiency and desperate need for God. Because you know what? The good news is that we are not alone. God in Jesus Christ sees us and is coming alongside us even now. We don't have to have our own strength, or to know the next best moves, to be faithful disciples. The word for *poor* Jesus uses carries the connotation of *a beggar*. Just as the beggar cannot depend upon his self-sufficiency to meet the needs that he has for living, so must we acknowledge our poverty of spirit apart from God's grace.

The crazy truth of the sermon on the mount is that God's love, God's blessing, is for anyone who simply acknowledges their need. Then we are able to turn and receive God's love and forgiveness for us. And then we begin to realize true Christian community because we are free to forgive, to patiently listen and learn from those who are different from us, and to share God's unconditional love and acceptance with those around us.

Maybe I sound like I'm crazy. Don't worry, I'm on a plane and out of here tomorrow. But I believe the truth that God sees each and every one of you right now, and God loves you. God's surprising *blessing* is for you. In God's eyes, you are acceptable, worthy, loved. But know also you followers of Jesus: you have a special blessing because you have a special calling... to make sure the crowds out there know that God's love is for them, too. So rejoice and be glad for Jesus' shocking inaugural offers blessing for you, and all people.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.

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Micah 6:1-8
Matthew 5:1-12