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

**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

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Last week, we read about Jesus’ initial steps to put together a group of followers, starting with four fishermen. Jesus promised to teach them a different kind of fishing: they would no longer be catching fish; they would be catching a vision. They would be catching a vision of what it means to live in the community of God and they would be helping others catch that vision, too.

Jesus has been going throughout the region, teaching and healing, so much that his fame had spread throughout the region with great crowds following him everywhere. And now it’s time to get down to business. So he starts with the new students, his disciples.

And leaving the crowds behind, he climbs the mountain, gathers his disciples around and sits down to teach them about the way things will work in God’s community. We know it as the Sermon on the Mount and it begins with “The Beatitudes.”

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

 ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

 ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

 for they will be filled.

 ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

 ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

 ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

 ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the

 kingdom of heaven.

 ‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of

 evil against you falsely\* on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward

 is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who

 were before you.

Writing about this passage, Biblical scholar and preacher Tom Long compares it to the preamble to the U.S. Constitution. If you know it, feel free to say it with me.

We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Long writes,

[Just as] this introductory statement defines the essence of the nation’s vision of itself and expresses the sort of citizenry it hopes to embody, [ so] in a similar manner, the Sermon on the Mount is the constitution of the church of Jesus Christ, and the Beatitudes are its preamble. The Beatitudes describe the purpose of every holy law, the foundation of every custom, the aim of every practice of this new society, this colony of the kingdom, the church called and instructed by Jesus. [[1]](#footnote-1)

The first word of the preamble to the Sermon on the Mount is “blessed.” And in the course of this teaching, Jesus repeats that word eight times: blessed. But what he chooses to name blessed is not at all what someone listening would expect to hear.

He doesn’t say “blessed are those who are secured by their wealth or position.” He doesn’t say “blessed are those who are protected from their enemies. And he doesn’t say “blessed are those who are strong and powerful.”

Everything he says reverses the expectations of his audience, both then and now. As one writer puts it, God’s kingdom puts power in reverse.

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Blessed are those who mourn.

Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Blessed are those who have mercy.

 Blessed are the pure in heart.

Blessed are the peacemakers.

 Blessed are those who are persecuted for Jesus’ sake.

Throughout the ages, but particularly in times of patriotic fervor, Christians have been tempted to equate the values of empire, be it Roman or American, with Christian values, conflating the ideals of individualism, self-sufficiency and status with the values by which Jesus lived his life and calls us to live ours. This text and many like it, including Micah’s call to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God, flies in the face of those values today, just as they challenged the Jewish community’s collusion with the Roman government then.

Throughout the years, the relationship between church and state in the United States has, at times, been cozy and at others, contentious. For modern Reformed Christians, like us, the Barmen Declaration has acted as a touch stone. And I have gone back to it time and time again during my ministry.

You may recall that the Barmen Declaration is a statement of faith written by German theologians and pastors in response to the German church’s attempt to ally itself with the claims of Christ and the claims of National Socialism at the same time. In the declaration, these pastors claimed there could be no both/and relationship between the mutually exclusive claims of Christ and Hitler. It was either/or. They refused to let the church have it both ways.

Among the declarations they made was the fundamental assertion that their allegiance belonged to Christ and Christ alone. “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theological and pastor, took this commitment to heart, trusting and obeying God even in the face of his own death. For his role in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, he paid the ultimate price.

In hindsight, it’s easy to see how the church’s support of the German empire, tacit or explicit, threatened the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the skeletal frames and the hollow eyes of those who were rescued from the concentration camps, we saw the devastating consequences of the Germans’ divided loyalty.

Likewise, in the pictures of young, black college students being kicked, slapped, spit on and arrested as they sat at lunch counters designated for whites only, we see the obvious conflict between the ways of Christ and the ways of government-sanctioned racial discrimination that was allowed to exist in our own country for many years.

As Christians, we’ve faced this conflict throughout our history. No time period or government has been exempt from this struggle.

We all long for change: for relief from stagnant wages, expensive health care, overwhelming student debt and security against threats to our well-being, both foreign and domestic. But as we live into the political reality of a new day, we must continue to be alert to the ways our loyalty to Christ will be challenged, indeed how it has already.

How do we live as followers of Jesus in this day?

How do we serve a God who calls us to be merciful and yet support the continuing immigration policies that separate loved ones from their families?

How do we serve a God who calls us to be peacemakers and, at the same time, put up barriers that prevent us from building bridges with our neighbors?

How do we serve a God who calls us to be humble and yet continue to support the bombastic and arrogant claims of people in power, on both sides of the aisle?

The stakes are real. If we forsake our allegiance to the ways of Christ, we risk forsaking our very identity as Christ followers. We risk losing ourselves in the pursuit of ways that forget or set aside the values of God out of fear or hate or the need for security.

We all long to feel secure. We all long to be loved and accepted and affirmed. God knows this. And God has promised to be with us all the way.

And so, from the very beginning of their association in ministry, Jesus calls his followers blessed. You are blessed and you will be blessed when you live according to the values of God’s community.

One preacher puts it this way:

The Beatitudes are identifiers of discipleship; characteristics of the faithful; attributes of believers. They are truth-tellings. They name our blessings but also what is at stake in these blessings. [We] have to know who [we] are in order to be able hear the rest of what Jesus has to say about who he needs [us] to be.

You are blessed. You have to hear that on the front end. And note that being blessed is not just for the sake of potential joy, *but also for the sake of making it through that which will be difficult*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

These are Jesus’ first words to his disciples.

Now listen to his final words.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As we prepare to welcome new members and to elect new leaders for our congregation, Jesus calls us to catch a vision of what it means to live in the community of God. Today, he begins to teach us what that looks like.

During this season of Epiphany, may we be open to the ever unfolding revelation of whose we are that we might also be able to hear who Jesus needs us to be.

Amen.

1. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, 1934. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Karoline Lewis, “Commentary on Matthew 5:1-12, [WorkingPreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org/), Luther Seminary, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew 28:19-20, NRSV. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)