

A Teaching Sermon Preached at Oak Bay United Church, January 30, 2011

*Included in this service was recognition of the reintroduction of a wonderful stained dome at the front of the sanctuary*

(Note: This sermon draws heavily for its interpretation upon Michael H. Crosby, *House of Disciples: Church, Economics, and Justice in Matthew*, Orbis. 1988)

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." "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. 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 are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot." "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

There was a time when I waited for things to get back to normal. I remember thinking, when all five of our children were teenagers at the same time, "once the kids leave ... then, then things will settle down." Now, of course when people ask about the family, I basically give the standard media release "they're fine" even though with five children and five grandchildren there is only about 3 minutes a year when they are all good at the same time.

Once we wrestle that mortgage to the mat, then ...

Well, maybe when we're through menopause, then ...

The other night she rolls onto her side and props herself up on her elbow on the bed.

"Yes," I said, putting down my book.

She looked at me for awhile in silence and then said, "You really should let me do something about those eyebrows!"

Call me oversensitive but perhaps another shift, although it was probably more a function of the "Oh God, help me focus, look a bird" personality that makes her so interesting.

Nothing surprising in this, she's always changing, the family changes, only I remain the same.

The truth of course is that relationships change constantly or, at least, regularly.

The challenge is knowing what is appropriate for the time.

In some ways, this rhythm of seeking the appropriate in a relationship should be quite familiar to us as Christians because, for Christians, relationships are what it is all about.

Relationships are the frame that hangs around the picture not only of our life or the work of our congregation but indeed the cosmos itself. For we believe God reaches out to us, creates and calls us into relationship with one another, with the creation, with ourselves and with God.

The Hebrew Scriptures are cast in terms of relationships. **Righteousness**, which is a key concept in the Hebrew Scriptures, has little to do with moral rightness or superiority but actually has to do with fulfilling the requirements, the privileges and obligations of a relationship. One can be a *righteous momma* without being religious or listening to Motown but by just doing what is expected of a good mother.

It is this understanding that has spilled over into the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew is all about encouraging, admonishing the relatively prosperous house churches to whom he writes to order their lives and their living so as to faithfully fulfill the obligations and claim the blessings of key relationships.

Against this backdrop the key questions then become ***what are the foundational relationships*** and ***who gets to decide*** what is appropriate? Questions of **priority** and **authority**.

I once had a good friend and mentor in Christian Ethics who would always say that the most basic question was “**Whom will you serve?**” Now, at the time, I was younger. I was drawn more to the “I’ve got to be me” and “I’ll do it my way” themes but, as I have aged I have come to see the wisdom in his question. In service of what or whom will we give our best? And what are the blessings we expect in return?

One of the two most potentially powerful forces being unleashed now in our society are the number of the people in their late fifties and sixties who are saying, “Wait a minute, I think there is something more I should be doing with my life than what I have been about until now.” A powerful force and an awesome resource.

The gospel of Matthew answers that basic question, not surprisingly, by saying that the key relationship is with the God who reaches out to us and whom has been made known to us

through Jesus; **and**, if we want a life that we might call blessed, we need to attend to the requirements of that relationship. It needs to be the axle around which the wheel of our life revolves, however fast. Through Jesus, says Matthew, we catch a glimpse of God's dream and promise and how one should live in light of that. Jesus defines much of the focus. The Gospel of Matthew is written to help those who have made the decision to follow the Way of Jesus to figure out what's next. So what really are the requirements of this relationship?

This basic premise or methodology was very familiar to people in the centuries around the time of Christ. *Everyone knew* that individuals and households had to live their lives according to the place you found yourselves and the god that was deemed to be at the center of your household or caste. And it was very common for there to be, what are now referred to as, **household codes** that spelled out the expectations of people who lived within a household who gave allegiance to various gods.

Usually they were in two sections in a household code: the first dealt with order, who had to **submit** to whom - submission to civil authority, some dealt with the submission of wives to husbands, children to parents, slaves to masters. (And, as an aside, some of those New Testament passages against which people now recoil were thought to have been simply brought in from another household code.) The second section deals with relationships among various household members and how wealth and making money was to be dealt with.

Blessings are then defined as what happens to one and within one when everyone in the household lives out the code, when everyone fulfills the responsibilities and privileges of their relationships.

So what then might be the expectations of the household of Jesus?

The Beatitudes are not *exactly* a household code but they do pick up some of that feel, with some very significant changes. And the modifications are where it gets interesting.

We won't go through all the Beatitudes – that would be the focus of a conversation or study group. But let's look at the first couple.

Note the introduction – “when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up to the mountain,” In NT code, God was thought to reside on the mountain so going up to the mountain meant being closer to God. So the Beatitudes come from very close to the heart of God.

The first – “Blessed are the **poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Right away there would have been a head snap for the early Christians for instead of starting out with detailing obligations to the rich and powerful Matthew turns the spotlight in an entirely different direction to .... “the poor in spirit.” We have tended to mush this up and season it with a bit of sentimentality so that we translate poor in spirit as a kind of humble, spiritual, maybe semi-depressed, Canadian. It’s not about that at all.

Nor is it about glorifying poverty or romanticizing the poor or about spiritualizing anything. It is about **focus**. Matthew shifts the gaze of the primarily prosperous house churches in his care – as opposed to those we find in Luke – shifts that gaze from their own stuff, the preoccupations and trappings of their class to the poor, saying that the obligations of our relationships, the relationships of Jesus followers, are *not only to those like us* but to those whom we normally think lie outside of our sphere. Actually pretty radical stuff. “The poor in spirit are those who work for the fulfillment of justice on behalf of those who are poor.” (Crosby, House of Disciples, p. 154). And the kicker in this is that the phrase “poor in Spirit” was often used to describe those members of ascetic Qumran community – like John the Baptist – who took this whole business of sacrificial living to a whole different level, like a gaggle of Al Tysicks. By leading with this Matthew ups the intensity, no tip of the cap for these guys. If you’re in, you’re in. The feeling would be much more akin to an elite military unit, hockey team or martial arts dojo. No dabbling.

So right off the top in, what some consider kind of a summary of Matthew’s moral code, he flips it, goes immediately to the wide view, enlarging the scope of eligible relationships, people to whom attention should be paid. In the life of a blessed and blessing community these must be in the field of view.

We won’t do all the Beatitudes but, quickly, the next one “**those who mourn**,” – this is not just about those who have lost someone they love, although they are included. The word here points to **the very depth of human brokenness** (Crosby, p. 156) combined with the promise that in God’s community these people will find not only acceptance but healing. What Matthew says to these tending towards comfortable house churches is that those who choose to follow the path of Jesus not only gather for good times but also *to be and to become* a community in

which healing – of body, soul and spirit – happens. That is what we are to be about. “Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.”

One more, quickly. “**Blessed are the meek.**” Meek does not translate as wimpy. The fast way into the depth of this is by looking at the last phrase of the saying, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Think of the big picture here. Matthew and his posse live under the Roman Empire who indeed dominate much of the known world through some brilliant management and engineering projects like roads, aqueducts and sports arenas) but also through violence, corruption and on the backs of millions of powerless. Matthew says “Uh-uh!” Not the way of the Christ, this kind of society is not the dream of God where people are used, ignored, exploited, where the wealth accrues to those with military might alone, who cut off cell phone service and the internet. Not the long term vision. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

You get the drift. Matthew holds up an amazing vision that promises that those who live up to the obligations of the relationships valued by God and claim the privileges of those relationships will experience blessing at a profound level. AND they will experience that sense of God drawing close to them and them knowing they are about the “right stuff.” //

Remember at the end of this reading, after the Beatitudes, Matthew basically renames the community that seeks to live this way in the light of the Jesus priorities. “You are the salt of the earth,” or, as some now think a better translation is, “you are salt for the earth,” – which is a sermon on the environment waiting to be preached but let’s leave it for now because the second one is, “**You are the light of the world.**”

The community that seeks to live in accordance with its prime relationships – many of which are sketched in the Beatitudes – will become a light for the world, a model, if you will, of God’s dream. I know ... hardly a Canadian attitude at all and one that because of the church’s history of arrogance, self-righteousness and moral snobbery we are rightly shy about announcing ... still ....

So on this day when we celebrate this magnificent dome we are again invited to a bit of flip in our self-understanding. Most people think of stained glass as viewed from the inside. Wow, when the sun shines, that is spectacular and it is. Look how it depicts some of the stories and symbols of our faith. And that’s true. But what Matthew is saying is that the prime function of

stained glass and a dome like this is for those outside so they will look at the church and because of the light that shines from within they will say “Wow, so that’s how people are supposed to treat one another. “In the darkness – another sermon waiting to be preached - has come a great light.” That’s what a real life looks like. So, if we lived in Movieland our dome would in fact be a lens that would focus and shine the light from righteous living like a beacon; a column of light generated by righteous living. Now that’s a vision!

### **So, where does this leave us?**

Well, at the very least, we as individuals are called upon to think about the core relationships in our life and how we live in response to them. And I often hate this part because this will probably mean a conversation with my wife about priorities, time? And it can get hard fast.

And I will have to set down my zoom lens for a wide angle and look around to see who I’m blowing by if not off. Am I investing my time and money more as a consumer than as a disciple? And I hate that too because there’s still lots of neat stuff I haven’t gotten yet. And I will be forced to think about us as a community – our priorities, our focus and the key relationships to which we are called to pay attention because after all, the Beatitudes were written to a community as a whole and not primarily to individuals.

Certainly we are being prodded to revisit our core relationships, to make sure we are attending to that which is both fundamental and strategic.

[This part was edited on the fly - One of the things that distinguishes this congregation from 90% of United Church congregations is that we are overwhelmed with opportunities, and more seem to come every week. So it will take some disciplined discernment to figure out the relationships to which we most need to attend.

To me it seems we are being called to look at our relationships with children, youth and young families. There is such need out there and we already leaning into this. I think we are being pulled to attend to our community relationships; and again, we have strong platforms. The Thrift Shop, the Angel Gifts, our support of Our place all give us a way to attend to those relationships and to help us not to forget the larger view, a place from which to build. And then there are the arts – to my mind we have had overwhelming success and positive response to this facility and the music that comes from here. It is short step to develop further our relationships with the Arts community.

And, because each of these requires leadership, we will have to be intensely involved with the development and support of leaders, some of whom have just recently come through the doors. To me those set the general direction that requires important conversations about priorities, strategies and call. But we are capable of having those conversations and making tough decisions in a manner that sheds light. And it may require some re-imagining, just like every stage of marriage and family seems to require every now and again. All of it held within the arms of deepening spiritual practice and healing.]]

**You know this dome is really kind of a fascinating symbol, is it not? If I have the story right, it** had to be taken apart for all the seismic upgrading. And then when we went to put it back together the old leading could not be used and some of the stained glass had to be replaced because it no longer let in the light. Even though there were some amazing pieces, we needed the great skills of Ed & Tom to form something new out of what we once thought was “done.” That’s like us, as a congregation and maybe even as individuals in our changing relationships. Always having to look again at the pieces to be reclaimed, cleaned and polished and maybe reset in a slightly different frame. The promise is beauty and light that shines from the outside and the in. And that’s called blessing.

As a congregation we have been blessed; may we be a blessing, even a light to the world.