

Daring to be Disciples
Isaiah 53 3-9a
Matthew 5:1-17

It's appropriate that today, when we're ordaining and installing church officers; we're beginning a series on daring to be disciples. During the whole series we will be looking at that remarkable part of the Gospel of Matthew called the Sermon on the Mount. The gospel has brought us through Jesus birth, baptism, and temptations. It has recounted the calling of the first disciples and has told us that he began to teach and to heal. But what did he teach? Our answer comes with this startling collection of Jesus' sayings. Some have called this Jesus' Inaugural Address. Like that great leader Moses, Jesus went up the mountain. As Moses gave the Ten Commandments, Jesus gave these nine Beatitudes. I'm actually going to begin with the scripture that was designated for last Sunday, but we had other important matters to talk about last Sunday.

E. Stanley Jones, the great missionary to India was the only man ever to be elected bishop *in absentia*. He turned it down. Years later when asked why he did such a thing he laughed and replied, "As a bishop I would have to retire at 70, I'm now 82 and going strong." He was also asked "What do you think of the Beatitudes. He replied,

At first sight you feel that they turned everything upside down.

At second sight you understand that they turn everything right side up. The first time you read them they are impossible. The second time nothing else is possible. The beatitudes are not a chart for Christian duty. They are a charter for Christian liberty.

Let's look at these three statements Jones makes. One: "At first sight you feel that they turned everything upside down. At second sight you understand that they turn everything right side up." Last April Joe and I took a trip to the South Pacific, ending up in New Zealand. We found things to be upside down, there under the equator. So much there are the opposite of what they're supposed to be. April in New Zealand is the beginning, not of spring, but of autumn. New Zealanders have picnics on the beach on Christmas day, and they comment, "it's going to be a cold day today, the wind is coming from the South." Of course, to those who live there, everything that seems wrong to us is to them perfectly normal.

So it is with this Kingdom of God, this new age, that Jesus is introducing. Things are turned upside down (or should we say right side up?) God's values-- God's way of viewing things is not the world's way. And it's probably most evident and most disturbing in this sermon about God's blessings.

Sometimes the word "blessed" is translated "happy" but that doesn't capture the whole meaning. Someone is blessed who has God's good wishes,

God's favor, someone on whom God's love falls and on whom God smiles. Some of us might say, if we have a happy marriage and a big home and lots of money, "I've been blessed."

But that's the surprising and upsetting thing about this passage. Today most of us will be watching the Super Bowl, and the Super Bowl makes the world's values clear: "Blessed are the winners, for they're the only ones who count." And in our newspapers we're reading about conflict in Egypt. The message seems to be that it's not those who are meek who are blessed, but those who hold on to power. And it's not the peacemakers who are blessed, but those who fight.

Just like the people who live "down under," at first sight it looks as if Jesus is turning everything upside down. The poor in spirit are blessed? And those who mourn? The persecuted? The ones who are left out, ratted on, spat upon-- those are the blessed? Not by the world's standards. Not using the world's glasses. Jesus is saying the poor in spirit are the ones who know they don't know it all—who are open to God's spirit. The ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness—who hunger to do God's will-- are trying to be Jesus' disciples. These have a better chance of understanding what is really important, of seeing things right side up. Theirs is the kingdom—Jesus' kingdom of the spirit where material things are not important, where love and community matter more than being a millionaire and not being kicked off the island.

Second, Jones said, "The first time you read the beatitudes they're impossible, the second time you see nothing else is possible." As we remember our Old Testament texts we encounter another reason for seeing who the blessed really are. The Old Testament texts says it's not those who go through the motions of being religious who are blessed—it's those who really do God's will. If you work for justice, and share your bread with the hungry, God says, "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly "

We who have material wealth tend to depend on it, rather than God. Depending on our money, our abilities, other people, even depending on our own goodness--depending anything else than God, is not only unreliable--it keeps us from God who is our true source of strength and growth. These false sources of security tend to block the channels of blessing. A young boy was saying grace at dinner. Thank you God for the food, he said. His atheist father interrupted him. "God doesn't put food on this table," he said. 'I do.'" The boy started again. "Thank you God for giving us Daddy who provides our food."

Third, Jones said, "'The beatitudes are not a chart for Christian duty. They are a charter for Christian liberty.' Now this is a hard one, but I think Jones is pointing out to us that in this sermon Jesus is not giving us a command, or even good advice. He's not saying, "You ought to be poor in spirit, you ought to

mourn.” He’s stating a fact: “Those who are poor in spirit are blessed. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed.” So, if this isn’t a command, if this isn’t good advice, what should our response be? How about, “I see, now, Lord. I see the world from an entirely different perspective. I see that you’re inviting me to be in the world in an entirely different way—a way of simplicity and trust and hopefulness and compassion.” Look at Zaccheus, who by the world’s standards was blessed, but was not happy. When Jesus befriended him, he responded with joy, he gave a party, and he repaid all he’d cheated and gave much of his money to the poor--not because Jesus told him to--not because it was a way to win Jesus’ favor, but because he was free--free of his dependence on his wealth--free to do what he knew his master would want him to do. A charter of liberation.

For those of us who have chosen to follow Jesus, the next words are even more startling: “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.” Again, not a command, not an imperative, but a statement of fact. You are the ones who preserve and give this world flavor; you are the ones who enable people to see, who keep them from stumbling in the dark, who gives the world color. But, if the salt has lost its savor, if the salt gets mixed with impurities, if you aren’t the sort of person who focuses on God and God’s will—if you’re not pure of heart--the world is out of luck. And, finally, the first imperative of the whole sermon, (don’t worry, there will be many more before the sermon is done). “Let your light shine.’ How? By doing good. Notice, it doesn’t say, “MAKE your light shine,” it says “LET your light shine.” The implication is, that if you’re Jesus’ disciple you’ll hunger to do God’s will, so you will do good things. And just, as Bobby’s good dog Flame in our children’s sermon helped people see how good Bobby was, your life will bring glory to God.