

1 Corinthians 1: 18-31
Matthew 5: 1-12
January 29, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

How we hear these scriptures makes all the difference in how we understand them. Do we think of the people addressed by Jesus as “those people”? Are the poor, the meek, the persecuted, peacemakers and the rest “them” and not “us”?

I was brought up to believe that the poor were “them.” I was fortunate. They were less fortunate or unfortunate. I was blessed and they were not. I was told to help the “less fortunate” or, in later years, “the under privileged.”

This duality has resurfaced in recent years as we hear of white people being “privileged.” While presented as a simple socio-economic and political fact, I experience the term as another invitation to beat up on myself. In the 1970’s and 1980’s we called it white middle class guilt. It was not possible to enjoy the gift of being born in a prosperous nation because almost pleasure and happiness was purchased at the cost of the oppression of somebody.

I have a long history of struggle with this. I will not bore you with it. My experience is well summed up by singer songwriter, Ben Folds who shouts out:

“Y’all don’t know what it’s like, being male middle class and white.”

Please don’t misunderstand me. I am not denying that structural racism, economic inequality, homophobia, anti-Semitism, fear of Muslims, Central American immigrants and all the rest isn’t real. It is. To be blind to the sins of our nation and our religion is to perpetuate human tragedy. My concern is simply this: identifying who is responsible and telling them to

repent only perpetuates the very divisions which make sure that nothing happens. It is only when the “them” becomes a “we” that healing and justice happen. It is only when we stop differentiating ourselves from one another and start identifying with others that we build bridges and not walls. For the purposes of today’s scriptures, it is only when we claim our poverty, despair, our unfulfilled lives and our hunger for a peace the world cannot give that we find common bond with our sister and brother human beings. It is only then that we enter into a spiritual reality so great that our differences, the things we hold onto to make us feel safe and secure come to seem irrelevant. We become willing to leave them behind in order to enter into a reality so much more fulfilling and spacious.

Friends this is truly the message of Jesus. He taught this message in almost every meeting with his disciples and the people who crowded around him. How many of his parables are about leaving people and things behind to follow him and to enter what he called the Kingdom of God. The great question which Jesus presented to his time and still presents to us is this: what are you willing to do to receive the blessing of the Kingdom of God? What holds you back? What must you stop holding onto in order to have an open hand and heart to receive the peace and true security of the realm where God alone reigns?

Understood in this way, Jesus’ greatest teaching, the Sermon on the Mount, is not about others. It is about us! It is about blessedness, the sense that despite the suffering of life our lives are safely and securely in the hands of a loving God. In the words of the wonderful hymn, despite all the trouble and turmoil in the world, “it is well with my soul.”

When we hear the Beatitudes in a worldly way we think, “Why would I want to be a Christian if I am blessed when I am poor, hungry, mourning and persecuted? When we hear it

that way we are aware of all we stand to lose. What sane person would do that? The fact is that no sane person would.

But this is to misunderstand Jesus' teaching. Far from telling the disciples that the only way to enter the Kingdom of heaven is by abandoning all that provides a sense of meaning and purpose and security, Jesus tells them that the Kingdom is right here and right now. The reality is present in and among them now. The message is not to go and be someone you are not. The message is to let go of everything that keeps you from experiencing the precious creation you are. In short Jesus is pleading for his disciples to cultivate a deep trust in the awe-inspiring vision of the state of being where all people come together as God's children so that they willingly release all that keeps them from this truly blessed state.

Therefore it is true that, when we begin to enter the peace of God's kingdom, it is no longer suffering to be poor in spirit. It is no longer suffering to mourn or be persecuted. Instead it becomes part of the joy of truly trusting in the peace that this world cannot give. It promotes in us a desire to be merciful, forthright on behalf of others. It promotes a holy hunger to be a part of God's closing the gap between God's vision and human reality.

Stevie Wonder captures this in one of his early songs: "For once in my life, I won't let sorrow hurt me, not like it's hurt me before. For once unafraid, I can go where life leads me. I'm not alone anymore." "For once I can say, 'This is mine you can take it. As long as I know I have love I can make it.'"

Of course when we begin actually to *live* this way there are voices within us and beyond us which say, "How naïve! How out of touch with the real world! To use Paul's word in the passage from his letter to the Corinthians, how *foolish!* It is from the Greek word translated

“foolish” that we get the word “moron.” It is why Paul brazenly and without apology urges to Corinthians to become fools for Christ. For in the end, our moronic belief and a realm of life where our common life is united in submission the love of God will prove to be the wisest path of life—both individually and collectively.

Yet the hard truth is that the kingdom cannot be created by legislation. It must be grown spiritually. And the harder reality is that we cannot create this kingdom by our ideals and good intentions. This is God’s work. Our job is to listen and respond with faith hope and love. Amen.