

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany • January 30, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 5:1-12

“Follow Me: Jesus Speaks”

“How’d you like to have class outside today?” You might not be so keen on that in the middle of winter, but do you remember those days back in grade school (or college), days when the weather was so perfect outside your window? The sunny, blue sky made you wish that you could be out there on the lawn instead of inside the boring old classroom? That perfect kind of outdoor-classroom day is what I’ve imagined as the day when Jesus went up the mountainside to teach his disciples. There, in the northern region of Israel on the scenic slopes overlooking the Sea of Galilee, we hear Jesus speak.

Last week, we heard Jesus call people to follow him, to be his disciples. Many crowds did follow him, people from all around the region. The people in the crowds were curious. They weren’t sure what to make of this teacher and the miraculous things that he’d done, healing many people from illness and affliction. But they came to him, to watch, to hear him speak. By this point, some from the crowds have begun to be Jesus’ disciples. These are the people who follow him to learn from him. In addition to Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, many others from the crowds have heard Jesus’ call and want to know him better.

The crowds and the disciples followed. Some you might be feeling like the crowds today. You’ve heard about this Jesus, but you’re not sure what he’s about. Friends or family members may have invited you to “come and see,” so you’re watching and listening. What does it mean to follow Jesus? Many of you are already disciples, people who have been called to faith in Jesus as the Savior, the Light of the world. You, too, are here to hear about Jesus – and not just to hear about him, but to sit at his feet to learn from him, receiving what he gives. Those who are Jesus’ disciples find that life is changed by the word that he speaks.

Today Jesus speaks to the crowds, and especially to his disciples, sharing a message that has come to be known as “the Sermon on the Mount.” He sits down and begins to teach those who are following him, starting off by proclaiming a series of blessings or “beatitudes,” those verses that form the majority of our Gospel text. Jesus spoke these words two thousand years ago as real people like you and I listened, even as we hear them again today:

“The poor in spirit are blessed, because the reigning of heaven is theirs!” Who are the poor in spirit? They’re people who have to depend on someone else to provide for their spiritual need, who lack spiritual ability or strength of their own. The poor in spirit are all those people who have fallen short and aren’t perfect – even if they don’t realize their own need. So who are the poor in spirit? We are. We all are. With this opening beatitude, Jesus is proclaiming Good News to every human being, because he is bringing the reign of heaven into our lives. He has come, bringing the spiritual strength that we lack, freely giving to a world that knows nothing but spiritual poverty.

But if we hear Jesus’ blessing and take it to heart, it drives home the point that we’re not perfect. How is that good news? Jesus speaks to our need. “The people who are mourning are blessed, because they will be comforted!” Realizing your personal spiritual poverty – that you’re not worthy of God’s blessing – is pretty soul-crushing situation. But God doesn’t leave you crushed and mourning. Jesus tells his disciples that they will know the comfort of forgiveness, both now and in the age to come, when sin and death are wiped out. Similarly, the powerless who are oppressed by evil will stand tall in Jesus on the day that the world is made new: “The lowly are blessed, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Most of us have known emptiness in our lives, when the illusions of control with which we surround ourselves get shattered. The death of a family member or friend can do that. As we saw

earlier this week, even snow can powerfully demonstrate that we aren't really the ones in charge. Confronted by emptiness, recognizing that we are powerless to save ourselves, we then hunger and thirst for righteousness: for God to take action and to save us. Jesus speaks to his disciples again, saying, "The people who are hungering and thirsting for righteousness are blessed, because they will be satisfied!"

The next blessings that Jesus speaks are a little different from those we've heard so far. With these – indeed, with all the beatitudes – we're inclined to think of them as one long to-do list. "Be merciful. Be pure in heart. Be a peacemaker." Jesus isn't giving his disciples a to-do list, though; he's proclaiming blessing! When Jesus speaks, saying, "The merciful are blessed, because they will be shown mercy! The pure in heart are blessed, because they will see God! The peacemakers are blessed, because they will be called sons of God!" he's pointing his hearers to what happens when a person follows him. Jesus' disciples have experienced God's mercy and forgiveness, forces which change lives. So transformed, those who follow Jesus then become agents of his mercy. Similarly, those who are called by Jesus, God the Son, are given pure hearts. Experiencing the peace with God that comes through Jesus, his disciples are then sent into the world to share his peace-giving Good News with the world.

But the world-at-large doesn't welcome Jesus' disciples, people who point to Christ's righteousness as their ultimate hope, just as it rejected Christ himself. The forces of the world persecute those who follow him and proclaim the message of Christ crucified for us. They will continue to insult and slander Jesus' disciples until he comes again on the Last Day. But, Jesus says, "The ones who are persecuted because of righteousness are blessed, because the reign of heaven is theirs!" No matter what the world does to his disciples, they already know, in part, the reign of heaven in their lives. "Already, but not yet" – that's the case with most of these blessings.

In this Epiphany season, we celebrate that Jesus has brought the Light of God into our dark world (the "already"); however, there's still a lot of darkness (the "not yet"). The last of the blessings that Jesus speaks in today's Gospel isn't directed at the crowd, but to his disciples, the people living in the "already, but not yet" reign of heaven that he has brought into the world. "You are blessed," Jesus says, "when others revile you and persecute you and, by lying, say all kinds of evil against you because of me!" Those disciples who experience persecution can look ahead in hope, rejoice and be glad, not because of their own strength, but through Jesus' promise of what waits ahead when he ushers in his ultimate victory.

Back on that mountainside so many years ago, Jesus spoke his message with divine authority, proclaiming blessings to people in need. Those blessings, the beatitudes, invited people to step out of the crowds and into the company of the disciples, to follow Jesus. Following Jesus, you see, is only possible through his blessing. Being his disciple isn't something that we can do by our own strength. Understood in that light, it's fitting that the beatitudes open the Sermon on the Mount; they provide a point of entry.

Jesus is speaking to us today – not on a mountainside by the Sea of Galilee, but here and now. He still speaks to both the crowds and his disciples; however, the full significance of the Good News he shares will only be experienced by disciples. The Sermon on the Mount unfolds what it means to follow Jesus. We'll explore Jesus' teaching together over the rest of this Epiphany season under the theme "Follow Me," for the Sermon on the Mount holds implications for all those who are Jesus' disciples. He is the one who is discipling (shaping) us, changing our lives as he calls us out from the crowds.

Today I invite you to listen as Jesus speaks. Listen, as he calls you to his table to give you strength of spirit and courage to live as his disciple. Listen, as Jesus calls you "blessed."

Amen.