

**January 19, 2020**  
**Second Sunday after Epiphany**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
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**Rev. Jim Widboom**

## **Sermon on the Mount**

Matthew 5:1-12

Last Sunday's sermon saw the conclusion of chapter 3 in Matthew's gospel. We have skipped over 4 and look today at the beginning of Matthew chapter 5.

The events in Jesus' ministry in chapters 3 and 4 need to be remembered if we are to understand chapter 5; and also because they model our own coming to faith, the testing we face, and the call we hear to follow: Jesus' baptism and our baptism, Jesus' temptation and our testing, and the calling of his disciples, and our call to follow Jesus.

Chapter 5 and the two that follow are the largest sections of teaching in Jesus' ministry. And recommend, before we get too far in faith, that we sit down and learn from our teacher. He calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and the text says, "he sat down, his disciples came to him, and he began to teach them."

Teachers can change our lives. My wife Jan was an ESL teacher for many years. She always said, "it is not my goal to be a student's friend, my goal is to help them learn." Students were grateful that after a lot of hard work they could speak English. The new language changed their lives and they went on to very significant careers.

Jesus, before anything else, is our teacher. This is most certainly true in the Gospel of Matthew. We need to go to school before we are sent out. The content and textbook of Jesus' teaching are the next three chapters. And the title of the course is "the coming reign of God."

Today's text, the beatitudes, are like little lights shining into the world that help us see and recognize God at work in the world, all of which is essential in our following.

I want to look briefly at the third beatitude, "blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." All of the beatitudes are important for our spiritual life. They awaken in us a longing for God and begin to paint the world in a way that is very different from what we see every day. These sayings of Jesus are not meant to be a foundation for Christian ethics. I don't think Jesus meant for us to try to be meek. If you try to be meek you won't succeed, in fact, people will be annoyed with you for trying.

Jesus says he is meek and invites us to yoke up with him and learn from him. When we yoke up with Jesus we learn meekness.

All is slowed, obsessions are calmed, we find rest. We see the world belonging, in the eyes of Jesus, not to the proud or arrogant or the bully, but to the meek. And it is not just an ideal or unachievable goal, but is the current work of God in the world. This beatitude protects me from my own grasping and coveting what others have. I learn it from Jesus, it belongs to him, and is what the reign of God will look like.

Then I want to look briefly at “blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” So we are sitting in the classroom with Jesus, and he writes this on the chalkboard, “blessed are the pure in heart, they shall see God,” and says, now write me ten pages on what this means, and you have 25 years to complete it. That's the pedagogy of Jesus.

I am making some progress with this one and it has taken longer than 25 years. My wife says to me, “Jim, you like everyone.” And I think that's true. I don't know how I got this way, but it just seems fun to me to get to know everyone and learn from everyone, and see how the world looks to all different kinds of people.

I don't claim any purity of heart, but I can see the connection between purity of heart and seeing God. It's a longing to be free of distraction, to find freedom to love others without prejudice or expectation. To long for a purity of heart, is to long for God. And as in all the other beatitudes, what you long for, in the reign of God you will find. This beatitude is repeated in the words of Jesus, “seek first the kingdom of God.” Purity of heart is to seek to love people, like God loves people without prejudice or expectation ... with a singlemindedness.

Now finally I want to go back to the first beatitude, “blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In all my work with persons with mental illness, I learned so much. So often I was strengthened with the courage, patience, and honesty of these persons as they endured and came to terms with their illness. I could not comprehend the suffering and challenge that a brilliant, young person with a very bright future in their early twenties suddenly faces when symptoms of schizophrenia begin. And with strong efforts and treatments he or she hopes to recover, but slowly, and only after years, finally sees that all they hoped for is gone, the illness has taken it all away, and they must live full-time managing their illness. I was so blessed to watch my friends show such courage. Are they not the first who Jesus sees as blessed, and he gives to them the whole reign of God. It's okay with me if he does.

Now there is a character in a series of books I've read that I want to tell you about. His name is Armand Gamache. He is the main character in Louise Penny's series of detective novels. The stories are set in Quebec. He is the lead detective in Montreal's police force. In the first book I read, Armand is called to solve a murder in a monastery, far up in the cold of northern Quebec, famous for Gregorian chants. It is clear that the author has spiritual insight. She lived for a while in a monastery so she knew better how to write the book. I have come to respect and listen carefully to this chief of Montreal's police, Armand Gamache, because he brings a spiritual point of view, even the blessings of the beatitudes into his work and into the strategies for solving crimes.

What I want to share is the training Armand Gamache used in training his officers. There are four sentences. My wife shared them with me. I was beginning to work here, and when Bob Mecredy said you are head of staff, I thought how shall I approach this. The sentences Armand Gamache used in training police officers came to mind.

I quote, Armand Gamache speaking, "'there are four things that lead to wisdom. Are you ready for them.' The trainee nodded, wondering when the police work would begin. 'They are four sentences we learn to say and mean.' Gamache held up his hand as a fist and raised a finger with each point, 'I don't know, I need help, I'm sorry, I was wrong.'"

The sentences are the foundation of the detective's character. And seem good sentences to recite when trying to understand the beatitudes and also as I go about trying to be helpful to the congregation.

These sayings of Jesus become great words of encouragement. We see through his eyes, a world that does not exist now, but opens to us a longing for this new and different world. They were meant to be hung on a wall in our house so we can see every day through the eyes of Jesus a different world. The beatitudes tell us what we can expect when the reign of God comes. They are like lenses that help see the world more clearly. They can save us when we are lost. And they are the very first lesson on day one at school with our Lord.

I believe we are meant to attempt to live out the Sermon on the Mount. It is beyond us, but it is the way to life. It is a narrow road, not a broad one. To learn from our teacher, how to love our enemy, do good to those who hate us, to walk an extra mile, to not strike back, it is all beyond us, most of the time, but it is absolutely true that it leads to life and is to build your house on a rock that saves when all begins to wash away around us.