

Pastor's Message – 3/16/25
Matthew 7:21-23 Matthew 5:1-16

It doesn't seem like that long ago, but it's been 18 months since I got my new car. I remember having it delivered and, before I turned my old car over, I had to clean out the glove box. I'll confess, some of the things in my glove box had been there for over 20 years. Among them was a map, a paper map of Portage, WI, from when I lived in Westfield. I haven't lived in Westfield since 2005. Who has paper maps anymore? Who uses paper maps anymore.

Since I got this car, I just plug the address into my phone, Bluetooth it to the car's display and it comes up on the screen and even talks to me. Don't even have to use printed out MapQuest directions anymore! Wouldn't it be nice to have directions for living?

There have been influential documents which have spoken memorable lines over the centuries. And many of those have famous first lines. Take, for example, "Call me Ishmael." For many, these three words instantly conjure up images of sailing ships and obsessive captains chasing a white whale. Or how about "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"? Many people hearing this line would instantly think back to Charles Dickens' novel about the French Revolution. Almost every American would know the words "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union...." Each of these opening lines sets the stage for the rest of the text.

Today's lesson is no exception. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is one of the most famous texts in the Bible and it begins with six simple words, close to the heart of Christ: "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (v. 3). These words may be the beginning of "The World's Most Important Sermon." This sermon, given directly by Jesus, most likely a collection of Jesus's most significant teachings rather than a single sermon he preached once presents the ethical, missional, and spiritual road map meant to guide our lives as Christians. However, the directives of this sermon, while admired, are not and have not been widely accepted and practiced. According to British theologian, John R. W. Stott, "The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed."

The tenets of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, seem to fly in the face of logic and conventional wisdom. It makes no sense to modern culture, or any culture, for the poor to be considered blest, those who are humble to inherit the earth, the Kingdom of God given to those who are persecuted. Our culture looks up to and pursues wealth and power and influence and popularity.

But what does Jesus actually mean? Does he mean poor as in not having enough money or does it mean a more humble spirit? National leaders are not admired or voted for if they seem to be too meek (and weak?) and not strong

enough to take a stand against our enemies. If we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we may find fulfillment in our church where there our needs are met and there is refreshment for our souls. If we are merciful to others, then we will also receive mercy. I don't know how many people can claim that they are pure in heart. I can't but I still hope to see God.

We sure need peacemakers in this world. But we tend to give more honor to those whose job is to kill (even for a worthy cause). On the other hand, think of the honor given to Nelson Mandela at his funeral. He was able to bring peace to his country by his willingness to love his enemies. What higher reward can there be than to be called a son or daughter of God? There may not be many who are persecuted for their faith except in mission fields all over the world.

The Beatitudes, which are contained in the Sermon on the Mount, are simple, memorable, and foundational core competencies, the knowledge of which is critical for mastering what it means to be a Christian. The structure of the Beatitudes is organized and familiar to most of Jesus' hearers as advice for "the good life." The repetition of "blessed" or "happy," or "satisfied" in other Bible translations was what his listeners expected, but as was typical of Jesus' teaching, he was turning "common wisdom" on its head.

As Matthew suggests with the phrase "the kingdom of heaven," which seems to bracket this passage (verses 3 and 10), Jesus is not describing life in the ordinary world in which sinful humanity seems to be in charge, but life in the emerging kingdom where God is sovereign ruler. This is the New World in which those who mourn are comforted; where those who are meek receive their inheritance; where those who seek the kingdom of God find their quest fulfilled.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus redefines what it means to be a citizen of God's new world -- a world Jesus called "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven" (those terms are used interchangeably). Who are the people of God's world? While we all may look different on the surface and speak a different language, Jesus reveals at the very beginning of his discourse *that there are certain traits that will be common to all of those who are becoming part of God's new world*. It is those people who exhibit those traits that we admire, look up to, and inspire us to become the Kingdom of Heaven now and into the future.

Grandmother was trying to teach little Tommy some table manners. After a few lessons, he said: "Grandmother, you said I should always eat my pie with a fork when I am invited out to dinner."

"Yes, that's right," his grandmother replied.

"Well," said Tommy, "would you happen to have a piece of pie that I could practice on?"

We all need good examples to follow, to make the words real.

Jesus has encouraging words for those who strive to follow him and practice his directives in the Sermon on the Mount.

His comment is quite straightforward. "You are the salt of the earth. This is what and who you are. Don't forget it." His statement is not a command but a description. Too often, we're afraid that we're not "salty" enough, and when we get agitated like that, we're essentially making this all about ourselves instead of about Jesus. Whatever Jesus actually had in mind when he said, "You are the salt of the earth," we know that salt as an element has no value to itself. It's not about making salt better salt. Salt is salt. The value of salt is in its application to other things.

No wonder Jesus calls us "salt." We exist for others – to serve and care for others.

What do righteous people look like?

They look like light — lighthouses, spotlights, flashlights, lamps, candles in the darkness. Jesus says, "You are the light of the world" (v. 14). Once again, being light does not involve sitting through a college class, reading literature on the subject, or meditating about it. Jesus' statement is a description, not a command.

And, like salt, light does not exist for its own benefit, but for the benefit of everything it illuminates. Light provides warmth and energy to the world around it and encourages life and growth. We do the very same thing when we act as the light of the world, and when we reflect the light of Christ to others.

"No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket," says Jesus, "but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house" (v. 15). Our righteousness as Christians depends on doing whatever we can to be lights to each other and to the world around us. We are:

- + to be open and honest instead of hiding in the dark,
- + to offer other people warmth and encouragement instead of being cold and discouraging,
- + to be an energy source for others, so that together we can advance the mission of Christ in the world.

"Let your light shine before others," says Jesus, "so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (v. 16). Our challenge is to shine as a Christian community so that others will see what a life of love and faithfulness looks like. In a world of self-righteousness, we can be an example of Christ-righteousness — right relationship, that is, with God and neighbor.

There is so much darkness all around us, so much loneliness and isolation. Righteous Christians can truly be a light to the world — beacons of peace and reconciliation in a world that is so often full of conflict. If we perform such good works, people will see them, says Jesus. Then they will "give glory to your Father in heaven" (v. 16).

We read a short passage from Matthew 7 – may God protect us from judgment - but how do we know that we will be known by God? The answer is in the previous verses, in verses 15-20,

¹⁶ You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. ²⁰ [Yes, just as] you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.

The very religious people, those who prophesied in Jesus' name, who cast out demons, and performed miracles, will be quite surprised that Jesus does not know them. To live the Sermon on the Mount is to follow Jesus and do God's will.

By grace, we have the ability to tell people about God's world through the way we admit our faults, the way we cling to Christ, love our enemies, feed the needy, strive to keep our promises and so much more -- which Jesus goes on to outline later in his "sermon on the mount." Members of God's world, those who have been chosen by grace and brought to life in his love, have a surprising usefulness in this hurting world when we respond to that grace by walking in love.

British writer John Ruskin lived in the days when English villages were lighted by lamps along the street. One evening, he watched with a friend as a lamplighter moved slowly on a distant hill, lighting the lamps along the street. Ruskin said, "There is what I mean by being a real Christian. You can trace his course by the lights that he leaves burning."

It is our job to keep the lights burning.

The early Church prayed it three times/day, according to our Bible study author, Adam Hamilton, this year, and we pray it at least every Sunday. In the Lord's Prayer, we are focusing our hearts on the things Jesus asks us to pray for, and inviting God to use us, or work in and through us, that we might become, in some small way, the answer to this prayer."

I would expect that, at our final moments, we all want to be known by God. We are known by the foundations of our lives.

²⁴ "Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. ²⁵ Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. ²⁶ But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand.

²⁷ When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash (Matt. 7:15-20)"

Jesus' words in "The Worlds' Most Important Sermon" give us the bedrock foundation on which to build our lives and impact the world. Within the Sermon on the Mount are Jesus' "words that changed and can change the world."