

Sermon (2/19/17, Matthew 5: 38-48):

The story of Mary Poppins is about a magical, fantastical Nanny who, literally, arrives on a cloud to offer her services to a family whose incorrigible children have sent one Nanny after another running for their lives. Once hired, Mary Poppins first uses her very special tape measure to determine how each of the children, now in her charge, measures up. After stretching it from the sole of their feet to the top of their head, she then reads the tape. Hmmm-‘stubborn and mischievous’ reads the tape for the little boy as he inquires what mischievous means. ‘Cheeky and a bit naughty’ reads the tape for his older sister.

After their official measuring, the two children than ask Mary to measure herself. She reluctantly concedes, stretching the measuring tape from the bottom of her foot to the top of her head. ‘Practically perfect in every way’ she announces to the children.

Practically perfect. Good, perhaps, for Mary Poppins but, according to Jesus, practically is not going to cut it. No, ‘be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’, Jesus tells us. Really Jesus? Perfect like God? Have you forgotten what a mess we are?

Even if we focused our every word, our every deed, our every ounce of energy on what Jesus desires, we would end up falling far short. Perfect is just not something we are capable of.

In the movie, *Luther*, there is this wonderful scene between Martin Luther and his Mentor, Johann Von Staupitz, Martin’s influential mentor during his early years as a Benedictine Monk. As usual, Martin is in his bare bones room, known as a cell, verbally abusing himself for the many ways he cannot measure up as a servant of Christ. Hearing Martin, Johann comes to Martin’s cell asking him why he is so hard on himself.

‘In all my time with you, Martin,’ says Johann, ‘I have not heard you confess anything that is even remotely interesting.’

‘What kind of God is this?’ Martin asks him. ‘He demands perfection from us but then makes us incapable of living up to that thereby destining us to a life of suffering and divine retribution.’

This is the type of thing we want to say in response to today’s passage. What kind of Jesus is this, asking us to be perfect while knowing

full well we can't be?

Today's passage is a small part of Jesus' well known sermon on the mount. Few of us, even those who don't profess to be followers of Jesus, have not heard of it. We recognize it almost immediately within its first few words, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit; Blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek...' It has become the stuff of beautiful calligraphic renderings and countless paintings and pictures.

When we consider the audience to which it was first preached, we can only imagine how it must have sounded. That mountain was crowded with people who knew well what it was like to be poor; to be meek in the face of a powerful oppressor; and to feel the weight of endless grief. Never would they have called any of these things blessings. To be blessed is to find relief from these things not to be immersed in them.

The shock of hearing this from Jesus, must have sent their minds reeling. What does this mean? Is there a perspective to this stuff that I've never considered before?

What begins with a great challenge only gets more challenging. In every way, what Jesus demands in today's passage goes against the very instincts of who we are. It feels unnatural. It brutally assails our taken-for-granted sensibilities.

'You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' Jesus says. What Jesus is referring to is the law set out by Moses. Its intention was to put limits on people's retaliation for a wrong done to them...an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a wound for a wound, no more, stop there, curtail your instincts to escalate the situation.

To some degree, we see this played out in our political realm often. One country commits a cyber-attack on another. The attacked country carefully debates a measured, appropriate response; enough to keep the other in check but not too much that it will escalate the situation.

Jesus takes Moses' command a significant step further with a single word-'but'. 'But I say to you turn the other cheek. But I say to you if they sue you for your coat, give them your cloak too leaving you standing there naked. If those Roman Soldiers force you to carry their military equipment for a mile, carry it for them for two miles.'

This is not the world we live in. This is not the way things operate. Nice sentiment but not very practical.

‘Love your enemies.’ Quite frankly, this sounds like utter foolishness. School yard bullies would have a field day. Can you imagine parents advising a child to respond to bullies like this? Sounds like a surefire prescription to getting beaten up all over again.

Thankfully, reasoning ourselves out of a corner is a human forte. Perhaps, Jesus is just trying to give us something to aspire to. We reason. Or maybe Jesus is just shocking us into an awareness of how needful we are of God’s mercy and grace. Or, maybe this stuff worked back then, when life was so much more primitive than it is now. Or maybe there’s something cultural we’re missing about this passage. Maybe there’s something more snarky and in-your-face about these responses than we realize.

Well, maybe. Even so, in the Gospel of Matthew, more often than not, Jesus does tend to say what he means.

Jesus begins his ministry in the Gospel of Matthew with this challenging sermon. Clearly, through it, Jesus is painting a picture of what his ministry will be about and what God’s ‘kingdom on earth as it is in heaven’ looks like. In this masterpiece, Jesus imaginatively places us in a world that is radically different than the one we are in. It starkly reminds us that this new thing God is doing in Christ is radically new. Not a tweak here and an upgrade there but something unlike anything we could have possibly imagined on our own. All of which makes me wonder if that’s what our real problem is. Does this picture remind us of just how stunted and limited our imaginations have become? Are there possibilities for curing the world’s craziness that we have missed simply because our sights have become so narrowed and hollow?

I have always enjoyed science fiction movies and stories. Through this genre, authors use their imaginations to envision what the future might look like. Sometimes these visions are bleak and downright frightening. Other times the author’s imagination takes them in a completely different direction as they envision a future filled with hope and amazing possibility. The science fiction series ‘Star Trek’, created by Gene

Roddenberry, offered this rare type of vision which is, I think, one of the reasons it became so popular.

What Jesus offers is not science fiction but God authored and it was a vision not meant just for the great by-and-by but a vision whose reality was and is rooted in the present. The vision Jesus lays out in the beatitudes is a reality that seems to break out where ever Jesus went. The poor in Spirit find hope in Jesus. Those who mourn are comforted. Those who are powerless and vulnerable seem to hold a special place in Jesus' heart and a special place in God's kingdom building.

In Jesus we also see the power of grace at work. We see the greater vision of what it means to move far beyond an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth thinking. In Jesus we witness the incredible power behind turning the other cheek, giving not only one's coat but also a cloak, of walking the second mile even when that second mile leads to a cross on a hill.

So not only does Jesus paint for us what God's radically new Kingdom looks like but Jesus also lives it and, as a result, we see healing, mending, restoration, and new life breaking out where ever Jesus was present and continues to be present. This is no pie-in-the-sky vision. This is the reality of what God's presence in the world does and what we are capable of doing when we dare to imagine and participate in this kingdom building.

So, perhaps, the biggest problem we face as mortals is not so much the horrid shape the world is in, though it really is quite frightening, but the limits we have assumed and placed on what we can do about it. In our history, we have seen a few who have taken the words of the beatitudes seriously enough that they dared to live them.

It has been said, that Mahatma Gandhi first got his idea of non-violent resistance from Jesus' sermon on the mount. As a result, by way of Gandhi's fasts and his insistence that his followers not retaliate with violence, India finally freed itself from British tyranny.

Seeing the power of the Gandhi movement in India and also being all too familiar with Jesus' sermon on the mount, Martin Luther King, Jr. also adopted the ways of non-violent resistance in the search for civil rights of

people of color. None of us can refute the good that has come from this bold and courageous movement.

So, by way of the powerful, transformational effect that Jesus' beatitude lived life has had down through the ages and by the way it influenced Gandhi's and King's successful non-violent resistance movements, we can begin to sense that even though our impulse might be to quickly dismiss the notions of Jesus' beatitudes as nonsense, perhaps there is more to them than we first assume. In fact, perhaps, it is not the beatitudes that are the problem but our inability to imagine a future, even a near future, where the beatitudes are our best hope. A hope that brings God's kingdom a bid closer. A hope that finally breaks this incessant cycle of earthly destruction. Yes, the perfect Jesus paints is a kind of perfect Jesus challenges us to live with imaginative courage, boldness, and determination even in the face of seemingly impossible odds.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

## Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

*People: And also with you.*

Leader: Let us pray...

Loving God, your words to us today have stirred much in us. We confess there is a strong desire in us to dismiss them as nonsense and foolishness. There is a part of us that yearns to take the easy way, bending to our impulses of retaliation and protectionism. It's the stuff that our instincts push us towards. It's the stuff that feels good in the short run. We don't understand why we are wired this way but we are. We need rewiring, Holy Creator. We need to evolve into the people Jesus has challenged us to be. We need to mature the imaginations you have gifted us with so that we might see a more excellent way. We need to find the courage to live the foolishness you have shown us knowing that it is wiser than human wisdom. In other words, we desperately need your help, O God, for we cannot do any of this on our own. Heal us, shape us, transform us so that we might measure up to the perfection of your son. We pray this, O God, knowing, as you do, the sad shape your world is in. Wars rage, sabers rattle, courtrooms are overcrowded, relationships are set on edge by our proclivity to lash out. People suffer, creation suffers, poverty and neglect reign supreme by our self-centered desires to hoard more than we need. In your mercy, forgive us and reshape us, O God. We pray this day, O God, for those who lead us, for those in positions of power and influence, for those whose decisions have long reaching effects especially on the most vulnerable. In your mercy, forgive us and reshape us, O God. We pray this day, O God, for those in special need – the sick, the suffering, the weary, the broken, the poor in spirit, the grieving, the meek, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, and the merciful. We especially ask you to hear these prayers we now mention in our silence or aloud....

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

**All:** *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*