

Sermon for January 29, 2017
"What's This Jesus All About?"

Matthew 5:1-12

After his baptism and temptations, Jesus began traveling through Galilee proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God. It was during this ministry that he delivered what we call the Sermon on the Mount. Let's get the picture in our heads. Jesus was traveling around and the description of his actions included primarily casting out demons and healing with a little teaching thrown in. Now keep in mind that there were many healers and wonder workers in Jesus' day. Some of them were probably genuine, but many were false. The false wonder workers were just showmen using people's pain to get what they wanted.

But Jesus was different. He did go around working wonders and people came to him to be healed. But Jesus also had disciples. And these disciples traveled with him and he taught them. They were like a little community that followed Jesus around.

People probably wondered about this Jesus. What was going on here? He taught like a Rabbi but he healed people like a wonderworker. His teachings were profound yet down to earth. And he backed up what he said with actions. He could have demanded money and gifts from the people, but he didn't.

It was in this context that Jesus taught the lesson we call the Sermon on the Mount. Just as people were wondering to themselves "What's this Jesus all about?" Jesus told them. The Bible says that when Jesus saw the crowds he went up the mountain and sat down and began to teach his disciples. Now, when most people picture the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is standing before a crowd of thousands of people. And there probably were thousands of people in the crowd, but Jesus is not addressing the crowd. It says that he addressed his disciples.

This would not have been the 12 disciples we usually think about. At this point only four of those had been called. The "disciples" were the people who had come to believe in Jesus and were following him to learn from him. It may have been as many as a hundred or more people, but it was much less than the crowd we usually think of.

There is something else important to notice here. It says that Jesus went up the mountain. You might think that this was to get away from the crowds so that he could talk more privately to the disciples. But it also has some symbolic importance. Moses had gone up a mountain, so in a sense Matthew is portraying Jesus as a second Moses.

There are several things we can learn from the beatitudes about what Jesus is all about and what following him is all about. First of all the church is a community of deliverance. Matthew chooses his words carefully when he reports and describes Jesus' actions and teachings. He makes it clear that Jesus is deliverer; a Savior. Up till that time Moses was the greatest deliverer that people knew of. He had led the nation of Israel out of bondage and to the Promised Land. God worked mighty wonders through Moses.

Matthew wants his readers to see that Jesus is like Moses in many ways. Jesus had come to lead people out of slavery to sin and death just as Moses had led them out of slavery to Pharaoh. Through Moses, God had sent the ten plagues, parted the Red Sea, brought forth water from a rock and food from the wind. In the same way through Jesus, God was working mighty deeds like calming the storm, casting out evil, healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the hungry. Of course we understand that what Jesus was doing was much greater. The scope of Jesus' act of salvation covers all of creation. Some would even argue that Moses was just a foreshadowing of what Jesus would do.

But it was important for people to see what kind of religious figure Jesus was. He was not just a teacher who formed a school of thought like the Pharisees or the Sadducees. He was not a "flash in the pan Messiah-wanna-be" who would lead a military revolt. He was not just some wonder worker who put on a good show. Jesus was a Savior and Deliverer. And what he was doing was creating a new nation of God's people. He was creating a holy priesthood of believers who would follow him in this work of delivering people from sin and death. Today, we know that holy nation of priests as the Church.

The second thing we learn is that the church is a community of humility. Just look at the beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful. Jesus is saying that God chooses to bless those with these attitudes. God will deliver the meek and give them the earth. God will reward the merciful and show them mercy. God will bless the pure in heart and they will see God!

One of the overriding attributes of all these that are blest is humility. These are the people who think of others first and humble themselves before God. These are the ones who mourn because they have sinned against God and their neighbor and God will comfort those who mourn. These are the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness. God will satisfy them. These are the ones whose hearts are pure.

This community of deliverance is distinguished from other communities by its humility before God. The community of political leaders seek to serve themselves by taking power, but this community seeks to serve others even to the point of sacrifice. The community of the Pharisees and Sadducees try to manipulate God, but this community seeks to surrender to God. The community of the rich try to buy deliverance, but this group is meek and poor in spirit before God. The community of the military seeks power through war, but this community seeks peace through weakness.

The third thing we learn is that the church is a community of suffering. The end of the beatitudes is a kind of rude awakening. Verses 3-9 are all "blessed this" and "blessed that." Then it says "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake." Now the disciples might have thought of other people who were persecuted like John the Baptist and they could feel sorry for them and be happy that God would bless them. But that wasn't enough. Jesus then said, "Blessed are YOU when people revile YOU and persecute YOU and utter all manners of evil against YOU falsely on my account."

Like any good preacher Jesus uses his words carefully to bring the message home to the hearers. They will suffer and be persecuted. They will be slandered and hated because of him. And they were! They were persecuted and died horrible deaths and to this day Christians are still often persecuted.

But Jesus told us it would happen. He told us that we would be persecuted. It isn't easy to be God's humble community of deliverance. Often times the people trying to bring real peace are the ones that are treated the worse. Whenever someone is enslaved to sin there is someone enslaving them and they don't want them delivered. So when the church speaks out against materialism or racism or sexism or homophobia or religious prejudice or injustice - there is always someone who hates us for it. But Jesus tells us to rejoice because God will reward us for that faithfulness.

People today look at the church and they wonder, "What's this Jesus all about?" And they come to a lot of conclusions based on what they see of the church. They figure Jesus is all about mutual affirmation and feeling good and that the church is just a mutual affirmation society that could care less about those outside. Others think Jesus is all about judging people and making them feel bad and guilty because that is all they see the church doing. Some think that Jesus is about just getting together with people who are like each other because to them the church looks like an exclusive country club. Some people think the church is about keeping certain people in positions of political power or keeping certain political philosophies in power, maintaining the socio-political status quo, because that is what they see of the church.

Are we really what Jesus intended us to be? Is the church today a humble community of deliverance that is willing to suffer for Jesus? Too often the church is busy looking out for its own interests. Too often the church degrades into some kind of social gathering place. Too often the church is not willing to suffer for the sake of Jesus and the people he died for.

What do people see when they look at our lives? Do they see humility and meekness and hunger for righteousness and mercy? Are we willing to let people slander us and speak badly of us because we stand for the right? Maybe we need to sit down and listen a little more closely to what our Lord has to say.