

January 29, 2023
4 Epiphany
Christ Church, Exeter
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An Inspiring Way to Empathy

Matthew 5:1-12

5When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

18For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 20Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. 26Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

In my Inquirers’ Class that started last week on Zoom, I reminded those who joined that the word Episcopal comes from the word that means bishop. We worship in an Episcopal Church and those who align with this branch of Christianity are called Episcopalians – one of the most difficult words to spell and sometimes pronounce. When our bishop visits us

every two years, to carry out his episcopal duties, we use the occasion to prepare young people and adults who want to be confirmed, received or reaffirm their baptismal vows.

In the process of preparing 12 young persons for their confirmation, there are some basic parts of our faith I review. One topic that come up a few weeks ago was the Ten Commandments. It would be good I thought to know what they are: how the first four deal with our relationship with God, and the following six are all about how we interact and live in community with other people. This list of instructions handed down by God to Moses on stone tablets on top of a holy mountain are clear and straightforward. And yes, half of them are structured in the negative: there are a lot of “shall not’s and “do not’s.” There are churches and believers today that hold up the Ten Commandants as the guiding standard for all of society, and they often petition to have them chiseled in granite and placed in front of county courthouses. If there is any challenge of teaching and living solely by the Ten Commandments in today’s world, it can boil the religious life down to how well we comply with a holy instruction list.

I last time I read anything by the French philosopher Albert Camus was in college. He was required reading in the liberal arts tracts at the time. I believe it was his first book *The Stranger* that was assigned. I came across this quote from a later work of his that captured the risk of seeing God only through a lens of “shall not.” Camus wrote in *The Fall* that “Religions are on the wrong track the moment they moralize and fulminate commandments. God is not needed to create guilt...Our fellow men suffice....” Which I take to mean: leave God out of the guilt business – our fellow human beings, neighbors, preachers or family members will most likely pick up the slack and convey a dose of shame and guilt over time.

And there is another list to consider. We hear it this morning. It is a list that inspirers more than it instructs. When given a chance to speak to the crowds, Jesus directs his teaching to people and human conditions who are not at the pinnacle of power and influence or in control. The most vocal defenders of the Ten Commandments as a litmus test to faith over the Beatitudes comes from those voices who would say that weakness and suffering are well in good when Jesus was speaking to ragtag group of fisherman and farmers, but two thousand years on Christians are now dominant, often in the majority in their cultures, and this religions we share did not gain billions of followers through weakness and suffering. These are voices that often favor a Prosperity Gospel of success, rather than one that speaks to the hungry, thirsty, persecuted and mourners.

Brandon Monk, a lawyer and writer, comes right out and says why the Beatitudes should not take a back seat to the Ten Commandments. “Because The Beatitudes teach empathy and encourage you to consider the view-point of the weak.”

The dictionary definition of empathy as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. It’s not the same as sympathy. As writer Rebecca O’Donnell puts it, “Empathy is walking a mile in somebody else’s moccasins. Sympathy is being sorry that their feet hurt.”

What that means to me is this: So much of what Jesus does it to ask those who follow him to put themselves in the shoes of others: the vulnerable, the isolated, and those in need of healing. Their condition could be your condition, their bad fortune could be your bad luck. Their illness your illness. Life has a way of turning on a dime and those riding high one day can find themselves in need of the same kind of mercy and understanding that Jesus pointed to as the heart of a faithful life. To me, Jesus is giving us permission to look foolish in the eyes of others if our actions align with gospel.

When I read Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, the second reading for this morning, I can see an extension of the challenge and invitation of the Beatitudes.

What was Paul's claim? Everything that Paul believed was seen through the lens of the life of Christ. Paul was not a disciple from Galilee like the Twelve. He would come along some three years after the trial, and the crucifixion and death and then Resurrection.

As the church's greatest missionaries, Paul took to the roads and cities of the Empire to share with anyone who would listen what he had seen with his own eyes – the risen Jesus.

How would people respond to a way of looking at life and God in ways opposite from which they had been raised to believe? It is not easy to dislodge a belief system passed down from ancestors.

Paul sees his challenge: vs. 18 "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." He embraces the surprising absurdity of what he was preaching. To my ears it sounds like Paul is saying: yes it all can sound too much to believe: that this prophet and teacher Jesus of Nazareth, crucified under Pontius Pilate, was raised from the dead and was and is the Christ, the Messiah, Son of God. And through him comes salvation of our souls and the world.

Paul went right after the Greeks who put their trust in reason and philosophy and faithful Jews trusted the Law and tradition. In today's language, Paul was an equal opportunity offender. The faith systems of before failed to deliver. "God made foolish the wisdom of the world."

It was if Paul was on the shore when Jesus preached the Beatitudes. V. 27 God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.

This past week has been another difficult one in California, with two mass shootings with the victims being from Asian-American communities, coupled with the aftermath of a another traffic stop gone horribly wrong with the brutal death of Tyre Nichol's in Memphis. Cascading news can become numbing over time.

In 2020 the magazine Scientific American (By Judith Hall, Mark Leary on September 17, 2020) published an essay titled: The U.S. Has an Empathy Deficit. "Out of all the fears,

stresses and indignities our citizens are living with, there emerges a kind of primal insecurity that undermines every aspect of life right now. It's no wonder that anxiety, depression and other psychological problems are on the rise.

Whenever people are troubled or hurting or dealing with serious problems, they want to feel that other people understand what they are going through and are concerned. But opportunities to give and receive empathy feel less than adequate these days: decreased social interaction, online get-togethers, air hugs,are not quite up to the task—and people are often so preoccupied with their own struggles that they aren't as attuned to other people's problems as they otherwise might be.”

Human beings need empathy – to give and receive. These three things might help to remedy our collective empathy deficit:

Take the time to ask those you encounter how they are feeling, and really listen. Try to put yourself in their shoes. Remember that we all tend to underestimate other people's emotional distress, and we're most likely to do so when those people are different from us.

Remind yourself that almost everyone is at the end of their rope these days. Many people barely have enough energy to handle their own problems, so they don't have their normal ability to think about yours.

Finally, be aware that what is empathy for one person may not be empathy for another person. It's not a concept that speaks for itself. Asking your friends, family, and coworkers what empathy is for them might open a new door to understanding and helping those around us.

It may be foolish for you and me to still believe that the world can be made more just and loving by following the teaching of one man long ago. If it were only his teaching, his movement would have died out long ago. His spirit continues to move in and through us in this community as we make our way through the world.

The God I have come to know is one who does more inviting than instructing. Inspires more than shames. Forgives and forgets more than we can ever know.

Are we foolish enough to believe?