



Impoverished Citizenship

Matthew 5:1-3

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We hunger for Jesus and for his Kingdom. Some of us hunger for what we know; others hunger for it even though we don't know from where the hunger comes and who it is that will cure that hunger.

Scripture

Matthew 5:1-3

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Sermon

Our oldest daughter Kate had a very hard seventh grade year that was very hurtful for her and frustrating for us. The rules of the game changed that year. Up until that time, being cute and sweet meant approval from adults and popularity with peers but in the seventh grade, adult approval became much less important and popularity was based on darker and more elusive personality traits. Like so much else in life, Kate's fall in popularity was unfair and based on the whims of others who could be cruel and were learning to enjoy it. Of course, as parents, we died for Kate in that time. In our nobler moments we wanted for her goodness to win the day. In our more human moments, we wished for the "mean girls" to get their just rewards, descending in the pecking order in direct inversion to Kate's ascent.

All of us have experienced what Kate experienced that seventh grade year. All of us have been on the outside of the "in" crowd. All of us have known rejection and that sad and scary feeling of not belonging. Some of us have been cut from the team, others fired from the job. There are people here who were rejected by parents or spouses, and certainly there are people here who have been ignored in the environment of the church.

If we took the time this morning to share with each other, I am willing to believe that every person here has a story of rejection. The same is true for the crowd that has gathered around Jesus. In the fourth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has begun his public ministry. He has proclaimed the Good News, and he has healed, "those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics..." Certainly, Jesus sees the crowd for what they are, a collection of fragile, broken people who are beginning to hope that Jesus is bringing them something that they longed for (even if they did not know that they longed for it).

There are so many claims that we want to make about Jesus, and here's one: He knows our hearts. Have you known that person who has such an empathetic heart that they seem to always understand your emotions and what you are thinking? As you read the gospels and the encounters that Jesus has with others, his empathy and his compassion are so evident and bring such peace and comfort to us who call him Lord.

And so Jesus peers out on this crowd gathered and he begins to assure them that they belong there. He wants them to know that as the host of this time of worship and teaching, they are welcomed as his guests.

Now, you may be thinking right now, isn't that nice? Isn't it nice of Jesus to be welcoming of people who want to be in his presence? But Jesus, and the sermon we are about to hear from Jesus, represent something so much greater than nice, something so much more important than hospitality. Again, in the fourth chapter, Jesus has been preaching and his first sermon is the simple call to repent and the simple but profound proclamation that, "the Kingdom of Heaven has come near."

The Kingdom of Heaven is such a critical part of the message of Jesus. He brings it up time after time, he describes it with analogies and he keeps assuring his followers that it is near and that he has brought it with them. And really the truth is that Jesus doesn't just bring the Kingdom, he is the Kingdom. If we want to know the power of the presence of God, if we want to be part of the purpose and the beauty of what God is doing in the world and in all of creation, then we need to be in unity with Jesus and in communion with the community of Jesus.

Easter Project, our high school mission trip to Tijuana Mexico, was such a powerful experience, and I was privileged to be there to cook for the kids and leaders but even more importantly to witness their week in the presence of Christ. One of the kids shared one night about how she didn't want to go back to Spokane and that she wanted to stay in Tijuana. Here's the deal: I grew up an hour north of Tijuana and no one that I knew wanted to go there unless they wanted cheap blankets or chess sets or something more nefarious. Tijuana is the opposite of the American dream. The poverty smells, the dogs run free, the walls are all tagged with graffiti, we built houses in the dump, water is dirty, sanitation is minimal... but for this girl and for the other kids and the adults that were there, Tijuana suggested the closeness of Christ's Kingdom.

In the midst of Tijuana's poverty were people who lived for Christ in ways that were simpler and as such more profound than ours. Ironically, the clutter of TJ seemed less than the more upscale clutter of what we have here. Whether or not we accept the truth of this, Jesus seemed closer in this foreign place, and his Kingdom seemed more accessible.

We hunger for Jesus and for his Kingdom. Some of us hunger for what we know; others hunger for it even though we don't know from where the hunger comes and who it is that will cure that hunger. We hunger for the experience of the kingdom, for the goodness and truth that is exclusive to the way of God, the Kingdom of Christ. And as Jesus looks out at the crowd that day, and as he looks at the crowd this day, he says to all of us: The Kingdom of Heaven is yours. I brought it. It's my gift. And it's yours. No one is precluded from receiving the gift.

That is what Jesus means when he asserts here in the beginning of the sermon, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The Kingdom has come crashing into our midst. Thank God. We are no longer subject to the rejection inherent to the Kingdom of this world. The Kingdom of Christ, with its values of deep love and true justice, with its economy of grace and mercy – all attributes of Jesus, the king of the kingdom – now become our values and our ethos. Again, as we said in the beginning of this sermon; everyone here has known rejection but as this sermon begins Jesus tells all of us that rejection is not what he brings to us; inclusion into his Kingdom is.

Over the course of these next few weeks, we will talk about the values of the Kingdom that are lifted up by Jesus in this sermon. We will see the way in which he sets his Kingdom apart from the other kingdom. We will see the way in which we are equipped by Jesus to live in his kingdom and the challenge therein.

But the sermon starts with blessing. The sermon starts with the preacher telling the congregation that the message is for all of them. No one is precluded; all are invited in by the one who extends the invitation.

The word for bless in Hebrew, the word that Jesus likely uses for this set of blessings that he begins the sermon with is the word, “Baruch.” In good Hebrew fashion it is an abstract word that comes from a concrete term and that term is the verb to “kneel.” As the sermon begins the King kneels before you and invites you – yes, you! – into his Kingdom.