

“THE RIGHT ATTITUDE”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
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(transcribed from audio file)

Siblings in Christ, let's listen for the word of God today, Changing our Attitudes.
The Gospel according to Matthew 5:1-12.

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

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

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely^[b] on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. NRSVue

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

So, back when we were planning worship for this month, Pastor Alex said, “So, you’re going to be able to just fly back on Saturday and preach the next day?” And I was like, “Yeah, no problem.” Yeah, that probably wasn’t too smart.

But I did, I prepared for today’s message, you know, with the scripture and research and put together a message. And as I got towards the end of my vacation...I was gone for two weeks with my family in Thailand, and it was great. It was fantastic, but when I go on vacation with my family, I don’t watch the news. Just focus on my family. And that’s what I did. So, at the end of the week, just before I got on the planes to get back here, I started to look at the news. There was a lot that happened and there’s a lot of scary things happening that kind of changed the world.

Venezuela happened while I was gone and then with Renee Good and the shooting. The encounter with the ICE agents and all that that entails. And I just realized that I can’t just preach that message that I pre-prepared. So, this is a message that comes to you after a lot of preparation added on with a 24-hour flight and some additional last-minute preparation trying to catch up. And so, I’m going to need some grace today, folks.

I’m gonna need grace in a couple of different ways. One is that like there’s a lot of thoughts going on. I’m going to try to pull them all together for you. Grace for that. Anytime you’re dealing with something that’s as difficult and charged as this, I’m bound to say something that’s going to hurt somebody in this room. Because it takes a lot of work to deal with difficult topics in a way that doesn’t cause harm and I just kind of want to get ahead of it and go, please know my heart and my intention as I come up before you.

I’m not trying to push my own view of what’s right and wrong in the world. I’m trying to speak to what the gospel and what God’s word might say into the situation that is causing so much pain and has caused so much pain.

So, I only want to offend where God needs to offend somebody, but otherwise I’ll take the buckets of grace, for the word choice has not been carefully thought out, to be honest with you.

It’s amazing traveling the distance that I did. You see, because it’s like 11:20 now here, but it’s 12:20 tomorrow there. So, adjusting is a lot on this. Yesterday morning I got on a plane in Seoul, Korea at 11:00 am and I landed 3 hours earlier in Chicago. I don’t know how that works, and my body doesn’t understand how that works, but I have made some effort to adjust. I’ve had the blessing to get to do enough

international travel. I've got this whole technique down where what I do is I do a little sleep deprivation so I don't get enough sleep the night before I travel and then I try to manage on the plane through a magical combination of complimentary coffee and wine so that I can at the right moment match up with the sleep cycle of where I'm going. And that often works, but it doesn't always work.

The thing is we have this thing inside of us, this circadian rhythm. There's a thing inside of you that no matter what your eyes see, or what your ears are told, or what you experience, there's something inside of you that says, "No. It's bedtime." It doesn't matter how much sun you see, or what the numbers say on a clock, or what they announce to you, or how much of a day you have yet to live. There is something inside of you that's been so well trained from what you've experienced up to that point, and it takes a lot of work to undo it. And that type of reversal of the way you've been trained is always difficult.

And Jesus in the Beatitudes is doing some hard work like that because he's taking the religious notion of what it is to be blessed or what it is to be cursed and he's reversing it. He's telling the Pharisees and the other religious leaders what you think is night is actually day. What you think is day is actually night. What you think is high is actually low. What you think is low, is actually high.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Are you kidding me? Those who don't feel an abundance of spirit and faith are blessed? Those who are meek are going to inherit the earth?

We're still in a society which believes that power and strength determine blessings. If you are powerful and strong, you are blessed and if you're not, that's a sign of probably something wrong with you. And Jesus comes into the middle of this with prevailing religious teachings of his time and unfortunately of prevailing secular preaching now in our own society and says, "No. no. no. I'm going to tell you this. It's not those of you who seem so strong in spirit, but those who seem poor in spirit. They're going to inherit the kingdom."

Those who are being persecuted, that persecution isn't a sign of curse. That persecution for those who are standing up for what is right is actually a sign that they are going to inherit the kingdom.

These are not trivial things. Jesus is telling the leaders at the time that what they are preaching is wrong. It's actually a reversal. It's a very particular way, it's all structured. It's in two basic stanza and in the original language they're each exactly

36 words long. Very well crafted. Very particular. Meant to establish two specific movements.

The first stanza is talking about people's connection with God. It's an up down kind of thing. And when it talks about the meek will inherit the earth, it doesn't mean that the timid, it doesn't mean the people who walk around going, "Oh I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I don't want to offend." It's a terrible English translation of the original text.

The meek that is talked about in this passage is the same word that is used when they train a war horse. To be meek is to take the incredible power that you have and strength that you have and to put it in service of a greater authority of a divine authority. To be meek is not to step back. To be meek in this context is to be guided by the one who you believe has the proper authority in this world.

And what Jesus is telling the leaders at the time is that they're not allowing God to lead and these people out here, they need to follow where God is leading. And it doesn't matter if they are poor, either in money or in spirit. It doesn't if they seem to be weak because the strength doesn't come from them and their accomplishments, it comes from the purposes of God.

As we consider dealing with this conflict between the teachings and thinkings that are around the people at the time and what Jesus brings, it reminds me of the frustration that I felt upon trying to catch up on the latest news cycle.

After finding out what happened in Minnesota, I thought, "Ooh, this seems like something that I need to understand before I get up and preach this Sunday." So, I tried to learn what happened. Do you know how hard that was? I went over various news outlets and here's the thing – people lie. People in authority lie and there's no apology for it.

2 Timothy, chapter 4 says, "There will come a time when we will surround ourselves with teachers who say what we want to hear." And the phrase that they say is that they give us teachings that will scratch the itch in our ears. The little biblical idiom. The idea that like I got this little thing here I want to hear. Oh, you did it. Oh, I'm going to listen to you some more. Ooh, I like this. This is exactly what we do.

So, when you dive into these realms, people just say what's going to fit the narrative they're already trying to build. So, when we face some tragic situation and we want to be as disciples of Jesus Christ, we want to be people of truth. We want to be

people of justice and righteousness. We have to go find it. You know how hard it is?

We have authorities who get up, and they say one thing and then there is video evidence that is not at all what happened and they don't say, "Oops." They don't say "I made a mistake." They just move on to the next narrative that will advance their thought. And what you find out by looking at different coverage of things that happen in this world, as trying to be a person of faith walking through it. The first step is to look for truth, but that is so hard to find because each of these little gatherings of teachers that tell people exactly what they want to hear, tell the truth in their own fashion.

The one side will say this is what happened. They don't care if it's true or not. It just sounds better when they say it that way. And then they leave out the details that make it a much more complicated situation.

Then I run over to my other little news outlet and tried to get it there. Ooh, I learned a whole new set of facts over here, but they left out some of these facts.

The problem is we are shaped by that. All that we delve into when we surround ourselves only with teaching and learning that we want to hear, we are shaped in such a way and there's like a circadian rhythm. It's like a setting inside of us and we can come out and someone can tell us, "No. No. No. It's light outside" and we'll say, "No, it's dark."

"This is a case of injustice."

"No. No. No. This is a case of what should have happened and that person deserved it. Yeah."

"This is something where behavior was not exactly as....."

"No. No. No. It was actually this."

We get ourselves wired up to hear the world the way we want to hear it. The problem is that the people of faith should not be lining up by political party. The people of faith should be lining up by a desire for truth, by the desire for love and mercy and righteousness for that to win the day. And if we're not careful, we'll stop caring about that. And we'll only listen for what we want to hear, what will scratch the itch of our own ear.

The truth is every situation is very complicated and at the end of the day there is a right and wrong, but our hopes of discovering that are severely inhibited by our desire simply to have our storyline reinforced. And when some news bit comes along which doesn't fit our narrative, we'll just push it aside or ignore it, or maybe not even read it.

I have my own personal conclusions of reading a bunch of news in a 24-hour cycle and trying to put together what happened in this one specific tragedy. But along the way, what I encountered I think, is even more disturbing, is that we have no possibility of having a conversation because we're just living in a different set of realities that we like the way it sounds and we keep reinforcing it.

What the world needs right now is not for all the people with red hats to win. And it's not that it needs all the people who are voting blue in their states to win. What the world needs now is for the people of God to care about what is right and what is wrong. For the people of God to care about what is truthful, even if it means going against the grain of the way that you vote politically. Even if it means going against your particular friend group. Even if it means having to change your view, your inner rhythm.

We have the ability to be people of love and mercy while at the same time being about justice and righteousness, and too often those who wear the label of Christian toss that aside simply to stay loyal to a political affiliation, or a friend group.

What the world needs now is the people of God to step up and be brave enough to declare truth and to look for it. How is it that each side never makes a mistake and the other side is filled with mistakes? How is that possible?

The truth is that the world cannot be neatly divided down a line that is drawn by political motivation and find the will of God firmly sitting on this side and the work of the devil on this side. That is a ridiculous notion.

The truth is that your dedication to being a disciple of Jesus Christ is gonna require you sometimes to cut across that line, and to sometimes say, that is wrong or that is complicated and there's some wrong and there's some right in there and there's some maybe just understanding that some broken people just collided in a really messy way. But it's not neat and clean along a line that was drawn by political motivations and lobbying groups and all that that just neatly aligns with the will of God.

The world has often tried to shape things in a self-serving way and Jesus in the Beatitudes is telling people that it's not what you're being taught, it's not neatly fitting. In fact it often turns things upside down and what is night is what is day. What is strong is actually weak and it's going to take some work on your part, but this is what the world needs.

The world needs this particular solution that I believe that we can bring as the church and that is that we desire truth. We desire righteousness. We desire mercy. We desire love because we are meek in service to God and sometimes my party is wrong. And sometimes my friend group is wrong. And sometimes my favorite news channel is wrong because only God is right.

So, it would be great if this sermon got to a conclusion with a solution, but I've been on a plane for 25 hours and I drank regular coffee today. I think it helped a little, and I don't want to make light of a tragedy in any way, so please hear that.

There is nothing light about the situation. So, I don't have a solution, but I think it's important to point at the problem. And while there are many problems that we can point at around this particular situation that's happened, I think perhaps the biggest, this is what I'm throwing out there. The biggest, as one of your spiritual leaders in this congregation, I'm pointing out what I think is a real problem that we need to face as disciples of Jesus Christ and that is that we cannot rely upon the usual channels to constantly give us truth or justice or mercy or righteousness, but we know those are the ways of our God and so we're going to have to do some hard work.

And if we're willing to put down some other identities and pick up the one as disciple of Jesus Christ, we might actually be the right voice at this time in history. So, that's what we need to aim for. So, let's do that and may God be glorified by your ability at whatever amount it is to truly seek out God's will and only God's will.

Amen?