

Matthew 5:1-12
“Simply Put”

Trinity UMC
January 29, 2017

Take note! Consider this...Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle; when the sun comes up, you'd better be running. (Herb Caen, San Francisco Chronicle, cited in W&W, 1/31/99),

We live in a **complicated and often brutal world** filled with competing needs. Hardly anything seems to be simple anymore. It's nearly February, and I haven't yet learned how to use the photo stick son Justin gave us to store all the pictures and videos of our grandchildren. I know it's great, but I seem to always miss a step in the transfer. Before clicking, I panic and fear losing, rather than saving, the images.

Family life is complicated too. I am often amazed at how our daughter Claire, who pastors a congregation in Kensington, MD, and her husband Adam, who works in downtown Washington, manage to juggle their schedules and remember who is to pick up which child. Often, night meetings at the church complicate dinner and bed times, but they seem to be thriving. It's inspiring.

So far, I have mentioned examples that are related to us as individuals, but what about complications in the larger society? If you're like me, the last year has caused much angst and heartache both for our country and the United Methodist Church. Many of my hopes for progress *in heaven becoming reality* right here on earth, as Jesus prayed and taught us to pray,

have been pushed aside as rhetoric, name calling, exclusion, and division have taken center stage.

What will be my response, what will be yours? We may not have the same degree of concern about building walls and pipelines, denying refugees hospitality, and the approaching schism in our beloved church but at some level all of our hearts and souls are affected. For discernment and help, let us look to scripture.

How fortuitous that in this season between Christmas and Lent, the readings for today focus on the teachings of Christ as the “light of the world.” Together let us re-learn and affirm that Jesus is the one who shows us the way out of darkness and confusion into light.

This morning I found much comfort in hearing the choir sing the familiar and uncomplicated words... “Be Thou My Vision, O Lord of my **heart**...thou my best thought by day or by night.” There it is, the plain unadorned truth and our greatest need. And then the last verse...“Heart of my own heart, whatever befall, still be my vision, O Ruler of all.”

I remember a devotional I read, written some time ago by a teacher, that caught my attention and has continued to guide me. It seems that the teacher arrived early on the first day of school and was surprised to see a student already anxiously waiting to get in. As she reached to open the door, the student looked at her with a long face and said, “It’s locked.”

Hear what happened next, expressed in the teacher’s own words. She wrote, “I began to fumble for my keys, and the child immediately brightened. “You’re a teacher!” he said enthusiastically. “**How do you know that?**” I asked. He hesitated for a moment, then said with respect, “You have the key.”

The teacher continues, “I was overwhelmed by that simple statement. It started me pondering my responsibilities as a teacher. It was perhaps the most **significant statement** directed toward me in my entire career, and I have never ceased to ponder it.” (Bausch, p. 350)

We, as Christians, have been given the key to life...the opportunity to live in relationship to God and one another through Christ. **We must not allow ourselves to be distracted.**

Today as disciples of Christ, you and I are invited to sit with Jesus on the mountain as he teaches his close friends about Kingdom living.

Traditionally, we have called these teachings found in Matthew 5, “*The Beatitudes*.” Do you remember memorizing these as a young person?

While the Beatitudes are anything but simple, through them Jesus offers us a blessing of simplicity. We don’t have to continue to be overwhelmed by living. **Now that’s Good News we need to help each other remember and cherish.**

When we stop to think about it, the “blessing of simplicity” seems rather ironic because upon close examination of the Beatitudes, we discover that Jesus puts things together that don’t seem to fit. In fact, some almost seem contradictory. For example, remember this one, “*Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*” Isn’t it a strange equation to relate poverty of the soul and heaven. It seems like richness of soul and spirit are more apt to go with heaven.

Do you know anyone who is rich in Spirit?

Do you know anyone who is absolutely certain that she or he knows the right doctrines, liturgies, the right Bible verses, the right view of God and prayer? If you know anyone like that, do you want to be around them?

With this in mind, could it be that Jesus is saying something like:

- “Blessed are those who know they don’t know it all.”
- “Blessed are those who know they don’t know God well enough.
- “Blessed are those who understand the love of their heart is not great enough.”
- “Blessed are those who know and acknowledge that they have still a long, long way to go in life.”
- “Blessed are those who, at the very center and core of their being have the humility of simplicity. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- “Blessed are those who love simply and know the pain of loss.
- “Blessed are those who are willing to walk through the valley of shadows as they mourn and work through their grief. For only by walking through can one move into the sunshine.”

Lectionary Homiletics, p.39: January 1999

Jesus was not the first to call people to live with simplicity. Hundreds of years before him the **prophet Micah** was called to God’s service at a time when people had forgotten God. They had reduced religion to a system of sacrifices. Micah looked at the situations that surrounded him, and cried out, “What does the Lord require of you?”

Answer: *To do justice, To love kindness, and Walk humbly with God.*

[Most of us are not called to the kind of radical simplicity that drew Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, or Thomas Merton. Instead, we are called into the complexity of the world. That is where we live our lives, **and that is where our souls will be nurtured or starved to death**. But, paradoxically, it is possible to have a certain simplicity in the middle of the complexity of our lives. **That simplicity can make all the difference in the world.**]

Lectionary Homiletics, p.40: January, 99

[Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said “I would not give anything for simplicity on this side of complexity, and I would give the whole world for simplicity on the other side of complexity.”

This is the simplicity offered us in the Beatitudes. In the **darkness of our most complicated life**, often we are called to hear the **simple invitation of Christ to have simplicity at our center.**]

Lectionary Homiletics, p.40: January, 99

Following the Chinese Revolution in 1948 a missionary family was forced to live under house arrest for many months. Although confined, they were reasonably comfortable. **The family included: a father, mother, and two children.**

One day a soldier came in and said, “Tomorrow you can return to America. But you may take only two hundred pounds with you, no more, no less.”

Well, they had been there for years and had accumulated lots of things. TWO HUNDRED POUNDS seemed impossible. **But they got the scales, and the family arguments commenced.**

“Must have this vase... Must have this typewriter, after all it’s nearly brand new. Must have these books. Must have this, must have that.” And so, they weighed everything and took it off the scale. Weighed it and took it off, until finally, right on the dot, they got to two hundred pounds.

The soldier came the next day and asked, “Ready to go?”

They said, “yes.”

He said, “Did you weigh everything?”

“**Yes!**” they emphatically replied, proud of their accomplishment.

“**Did you weigh the children?**”

The look on the guard’s face sent them scurrying back to the pile. Off went the typewriter...Off went the books...off went the vase into the trash.

The things that clutter our lives and separate and divide us---into the trash.

Simply put, the time **has come**, the time **is here**, the time **is now** to put things in perspective...so that we can live authentically in the “**light of Christ**”. Amen.