

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – Dav Timm

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; I Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

I'd like to read a short excerpt of a story by Heather O'Neal called *My So-Called Jesus*, told from the perspective of a girl who dresses in all black and whose classmates call her a whore. She talks about a boy named Jesus who moves to her town and joins her class at McDonald elementary. Jesus would get in trouble for doing ridiculous things like photocopying his head in a copier in the school library, or giving himself a haircut in art class.

Jesus liked absolutely everybody in our school, in a way that I'd never seen before or since. I learned this one day at lunchtime. It was sunny and beautiful out so we went to sit at the picnic tables that were at the end of the schoolyard. 'Uhh, we'd better turn right back,' I said. 'Look who's at the end of the table.' It was Sam, a boy no one talked to.

He lived across the street from the school, so his mother assumed she didn't have to get dressed when she came over. She'd show up with his lunch in her housecoat and slippers. His dad had a beard that came down to his chest and he walked down the street looking straight ahead of him and never using his neck. And once at the grocery store, I'd seen him using a sock as a wallet. 'I think he's all right,' Jesus said. 'He reminds me of Willy Wonka.' 'I saw him trying to burn the bottom of his shoes with a lighter,' I said.

There was no stopping Jesus, so we walked over towards him. Sam looked at us both, expecting us to tell him to get lost. 'Can we sit with you?' Jesus asked, sitting down. 'Okay,' Sam said wearily. 'Do you like the White Stripes?' I asked to make conversation. '...When they're in the middle of the street, I guess I do,' he said nervously, not knowing what the hell I was getting at, as though this was the setup to a joke that would end with me brushing liquid paper across his face.

I spent the lunch looking at my feet, not really knowing what one should say to the insane. Jesus just smiled, peacefully chewing his peanut butter sandwich. 'Did you ever go to a fair last year?' Sam said suddenly. 'They have these fancy horses with hair that goes down to their feet.' He took a photograph out of his pocket of the skinniest, prettiest white horse I'd ever seen. It was more beautiful than a unicorn. What could I say? The world was filled with mysteries.

If you want to hear the rest, I suggest you read O'Neal's book or download the podcast of *This American Life*, where I first heard the story. But I will offer this brief epilogue: Eventually, Jesus gets suspended for walking into the teachers' lounge to confront the substitute, Mrs. Allison, about throwing his friend's lunch away. On the third day of his suspension, he never comes home. Sam claimed to have seen Jesus in the park after he vanished, picking up litter. But you

couldn't believe everything Sam said – he had become completely obsessed with Jesus since his disappearance.

I know this piece of fiction is kind of a silly excuse for a sermon illustration, but I also think it gives us a pretty accurate idea of what a practical application of Christ's teachings might look like in our own lives. Indeed, the story of the Sermon on the Mount may seem a little silly to someone who has never heard it before. But, as we heard in our reading from First Corinthians, the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of humans. So I think it's fair to keep things a little silly.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays down a set of statements that provide a description of what the Christian life ought to look like. These beatitudes are not laws; they should not be regarded as a new Ten Commandments. Rather, they describe an example of what every Christian should be. For those who act accordingly, Jesus promises blessings of the kingdom.

You may notice that the list is bookended by, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This reminds us that the Christian lives in the world, but answers to a separate authority. As citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we separate ourselves from the rest of the world by living lives which utterly contradict the ways of a material lifestyle.

Often, when reading the New Testament, I've been puzzled with a question: what's the difference, if any, between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God? I don't claim to know the answer, but I do notice that Matthew favors the term "kingdom of heaven" in his Gospel. Theologian David Martyn Lloyd-Jones suggests that Matthew, who was writing to a primarily Jewish audience, wanted to correct the Jewish conception of the kingdom as a political, even military thing. In his "Introduction to the Beatitudes," he writes, "Our Lord's whole object here is to show that His kingdom is primarily a spiritual one. In other words He says to them, 'You must not think of this kingdom primarily as anything earthly. It is a kingdom in the heavens, which is certainly going to affect the earth in many different ways, but it is essentially spiritual.'" Jesus' kingdom exists wherever he is reigning, and in the midst of those who follow him.

In our Old Testament scripture, we get another lesson in honoring God and following his commandments. An examination of the reading from Micah reveals a sort of covenant lawsuit between the ungrateful people of Israel and God, with the prophet acting as attorney. He invokes the mountains, hills and foundations of the earth as witnesses. Micah then responds on behalf of his community, asking what God requires of his people: neither burnt offerings nor human sacrifices, but simply to act with justice, love, kindness, and humility.

Once again, this text serves as a reminder for how we as God's people should honor him. Although God had faithfully blessed the Israelites and brought them into the promised land, they failed to maintain their covenant and turned away. God calls upon the inanimate, geological

features of the earth to confirm their guilt. Perhaps the prophet is suggesting that the people were so deaf to God's calling that the mountains could hear better.

Learning to honor God seems difficult at times. It's easy to get caught up in religious rituals. What God asks of the Israelites is not to please him with good deeds and sacrifices, but with a lifestyle that honors him – one that is just, and humble. Micah's words provide a token of wisdom for a faithful life, and a precursor to the Beatitudes.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Sermon on the Mount in general and the Beatitudes in particular is the sheer backwardness of it all. Why would someone choose to be poor, mournful, meek and hungry when the values of our culture (i.e. wealth and power) oppose such behavior? The truth is that following Christ's example leads to authentic, eternal happiness. In Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, he emphasizes this fact: the message of the gospel seems like foolishness to those who don't believe, both Jews and Greeks. But Paul reminds us that the wisdom and power of God are completely unlike the wisdom and power of this world. The cross is a stumbling block to the faithless but a source of righteousness and redemption for God's people. Just as Jesus chooses the poor in spirit for the kingdom of heaven, God chooses the weak and foolish things to shame the strong and the wise.

The Beatitudes have long been one of my favorite passages of scripture, but they are nonetheless some of the most challenging lessons to be learned. When I was first asked to preach this Sunday, I initially felt relief that I got a relatively familiar scripture text. But when it came down to it, making sense of the Gospel proved to be a daunting and humbling task. Even after studying the words for weeks, I don't claim to understand them completely. But I do realize that an earnest attempt is what any Christian must put forth, as well as the recognition that we belong to God's kingdom, that we are meant to live as Jesus described, and that we will be truly blessed when we do.

When I approach the commitment to live out the Beatitudes, I am sometimes discouraged by the difficulty of such an endeavor. But we are not just called to live like this – through the power of Christ, we can live like this. As Lloyd-Jones puts it, "That is the central glory of the gospel. It can take the proudest man by nature and make him a man who is poor in spirit." I cannot help but be reminded of the lyrics to a song by mewithoutYou that had a profound influence on me during high school and my time at Greenville:

"But I'm so small I can barely be seen
how can this great love be inside of me?"
Look at your eyes
they're small in size
but they see enormous things
"Oh but I'm so afraid
I'm set in my ways"

But he'll make the rabbits and rocks sing his praise

"Oh but I'm too tired

I won't last long"

No he'll use the weak to overcome the strong.