**February 17, 2019**

*Passages: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26*

**Call to Worship**

Blessed are the poor

**It is me, Lord**

Blessed are the hungry

**It is me, Lord**

Blessed are those that weep

**It is us, Lord**

Blessed people who are hated, excluded, and reviled

**Our lives matter, Lord**

Blessed are those who belong to God

**We all belong to you, O Lord. We are blessed!**

**Preaching Theme**

This is a challenging text for many to interpret. Luke’s text (commonly referred to as the Beatitudes) points to the manifestation of God in and across our lived expe- riences. It is challenging because it requires us to see God in places and in ways that are antithetical to the world’s priorities and perspectives. As Christians, we are called to use a formula inverse to that provided by society. The world only sees blessing in the signs and wonders that are principally material in nature, ornate by design, signi- fied by status, and socially accepted or approved.

However, God’s priorities do not align with the world. God’s blessing is grace. It is operating and living in the preferences and expectations of God. God blesses those whom society marginalizes. As James Cone teaches, “Christian theology is a theol- ogy of liberation, and its task should be concerned with explicating the meaning of God’s liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that forces of liberation are the very activity of God.”1 God is God of the oppressed. God through Jesus Christ intends to liberate the captive; heal the sick; empower the poor and weak; uplift the downtrodden; and radically transform the political, social, and economic systems of this life.

*February 17, 2019*

God can and will show up in real and necessary ways. Christians ought to see God evidenced, or made real, in tangible and intangible forms within our lives. Ul- timately, if we follow God’s call, we will create conflict with the world around us. Society seeks to reinforce its own values, and the prioritizing of God’s values will make us antithetical and antagonistic to the world. But through God’s grace, we are blessed even in our discomfort. We are blessed through entering into a new way of being in which we reject the rubric that society attempts to use to measure our lives.

**Secondary Preaching Theme**

To live righteously is to simply live in right alignment with God and God’s plan. If your car’s wheels are misaligned, it can cause major problems for other parts of the car like the brakes or the wheel bearings. This imbalance of incongruence can ad- versely affect the car’s rate of speed, braking capacity, and gas mileage. This is likewise true in our spiritual lives. We are slow in getting where we are destined to go because we are not properly aligned. We are not maximizing our time, talent, and treasure for the glory of God.

In order to resolve that we will be blessed, there are people we need to avoid. The text points out three specific types of persons and personalities to avoid at all cost in order to be blessed of God and live in righteousness. God’s word says that blessed people avoid those who are ungodly. That is to say, persons and personalities who lack moral and ethical integrity. It says to avoid those who are sinners—those professional, habitual wrongdoers who major in mess, mayhem, and manure. God will bless the obedient and the faithful, so we must avoid those who serve as stumbling blocks to us.

Secondly, if you are resolved to be blessed, then there are some priorities you need to establish. Verse 2 tells us that a person who is blessed is so because God cen- ters their joy and desires on the things and ways as prescribed and dictated by God— that is what aligns with the word of God. If you make God your priorities, then your priorities will become God’s priorities. If you desire the Lord, you will be blessed!

Finally, you must be planted. Planted, meaning firmly positioned, settled, and established. We must be planted in order to grow! We must reflect on where we are planted and who planted us there. If where you’re planted is distanced from God, the things of God, and the people of God, then you need to reflect on where you are planted, because you are possibly planted in some unfertile place with decaying and demonic people. We must rather be planted in God’s word and work through our worship to and relationship with God.

Don’t wait until tomorrow to begin to rejoice, praise, and celebrate. Resolve to be blessed now and forevermore.

*February 17, 2019*

**Benediction**

Prayer of St. Francis

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.*

*O, divine master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.*

**February 3, 2019**

*Passages: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30*

**Call to Worship**

Some Pharisees wanted to test Jesus. So they asked him if it was right for a man to di- vorce his wife. They said, “Moses allows a man to divorce his wife and send her away.” **We will send no one away.**

Some people brought their children to Jesus so he could bless them. But his disciples told the people to stop bothering Jesus.

**We will send no one away.**

A crowd gathered but had nothing to eat. Jesus called his disciples, saying, “If I send them fasting to their home, they will faint away, for some of them have come a long way.”

**We will send no one away.**

We are called into community with one another regardless of our many differences. We are called to love those who have felt unwelcome in our spaces: those who have struggled with the acceptance of their identities in religious spaces and those who have questioned their status as children of God because of our failure to represent God’s love.

**We as a community of faith value diversity and celebrate differences as inten- tional acts of God’s creation. God’s love includes all persons, so we welcome and include all persons regardless of the differences between us. We will send no one away!**

**Preaching Theme**

The liturgical theme of Epiphany serves as a backdrop for contemporary con- templation of this text. Jesus, a familiar person in the community, exhibits an un- expected and emergent prophetic personality that is highlighted with a casual and sarcastic reference, “Joseph’s boy.” This can be taken as mere curiosity or amazement or interpreted as critique. Either deduction brings into question whether a child of Joseph could be prophetic or prominent in status. This represents not only a self-dep- recating cultural and communal reflection, but is also a devaluing of the inalienable

*February 3, 2019*

rightness and authority that Jesus embodied and sought to endow in those he is purposed to minister and save.

Though forecast centuries before in Isaiah 61, both Jesus’s presence and procla-

mation evidences truth in real time. Epiphany—divine manifestation—is the visual, tangible actualization of otherworldly assurance as acknowledged and experienced in our time.

Not unlike today, people of antiquity suffered under the false misapprehension that Jesus was defined by sociopolitical or genealogical constructs. Jesus is not defined by his connection to this community or lineage. Luke clearly and consistently refers to Jesus as the Son of God. This reality anchors Jesus in kinship with God while forever attaching all of humanity to that shared lineage and legacy. Jesus affirms that God’s blessing is not only for an “us.” God’s grace is not limited by biology, history, or community barriers; it is available to all.

Relationship with God is personal, yet fully realized in community. Thus, it is troublesome when persons see and practice their faith in a vacuum. In order to live our faith, we must be ready to transcend the boundaries that our communities and, too often, our churches have reinforced with radical love and connection.

**Secondary Preaching Themes**

There is a divine directive presented in 1 Corinthians 13. A Christ-inspired charge to all who profess God through Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.” God and God’s word expect nothing less from us than love. Anything and everything void of love is nothing.

Paul labors to explain the right and righteous way to exercise all spiritual gifts— the way of love. Paul does not identify love as a gift; rather it is a fruit of the Spirit. Love is the evidence that you are truly gifted and grafted in God through Jesus Christ.

Even the most spectacular manifestations from our gifts mean nothing unless motivated by love. Graciousness in speech and generosity extended in God’s name are meaningless if love is absent. Our genius, goals, and great accomplishments are inconsequential if not exercised or anchored in love.

Love never fails because it is not sourced from this world. Verse 8 reads, “Love never fails. As for prophecies, they will be brought to an end. As for tongues, they will stop. As for knowledge, it will be brought to an end.” This is so, because such things are partial in nature. It is all finite. It is all temporal and inevitably unnecessary when all is said and done. Divinely sourced love, however, endures.

**Benediction**

*God in whose image we are made*

*Jesus Christ, the Son, who is our advocate and affirmation*

*Holy Spirit whose acts lead toward righteousness*

*Be all power and glory in our lives*

*Hence now and forever more, Amen*

**April 21, 2019—**

**Easter Sunday**

*Passages: Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12*

**Call to Worship**

It is the first day of the week. Bring your doubts, your questions, and everything you do not understand with you to the tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**With unsettled minds, we come.**

Bring the fears that cause your insides to tremble. Even when you are expecting the worst, you are welcome here at the tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**With anxious souls, we come.**

Bring your emotions, no matter how raw. Look through the salty, stained-glass win- dows of your tears and see the empty tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**With our hearts overflowing with emotion, we come.**

Stoop down and take a good look at the grave clothes that are neatly folded in the tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ. See two angels dressed in brilliant white, where the body of Jesus once was placed.

**We see and believe.**

In the middle of trying to make sense of it all, as you are grasping for some semblance of control, may you hear Jesus call your name.

**Preaching Theme**

Our God is very much aware of our humanness. Indeed, God created us as hu- mans. Humanity was God’s idea. What’s more, our God knows *experientially* what it’s like to be human. God became flesh. As the Son of Man, Jesus experienced suffering, peace, unfulfilled desire, relief, exhaustion, hunger, and thirst. He knows what it feels like to be alone. He is well-acquainted with grief. And, Jesus confronted death just as each of us will. As the Son of Man, he wished for a way around the suffering. As the Son of God, he submitted to the will of the Father and conquered death forever. Not only did God come to earth to do good and bring healing . . . not only was he put to death by hanging on a tree but God raised him on the third day.

*April 21, 2019—Easter Sunday*

Today, as we focus on the account of Jesus’s resurrection, we recognize that the miracle of the Savior’s new life is set against the backdrop of the disciples’ humanness.

As humans, we fear. We are often afraid of what we can’t control and what we don’t understand. In Luke 24, some women went to Jesus’s tomb with spices they had prepared. They went to do what they could to make the best of the difficult circum- stances, but they found that the stone was rolled away and Jesus’s body was not there. Not only that, but two men in dazzling apparel appeared to them. They reacted in fear, just as we would likely do. Notice that it is right in the midst of the women’s fear that the word of the Lord speaks. The good news comes to them, not after they had figured everything out, but even as they trembled in fear. “He is not here. He has risen.”

As humans, we forget. Jesus had told them before that he would be delivered into the hands of sinful people and be crucified. He had also told them that he would rise again on the third day. He had spelled it all out clearly for them. But, when it mattered the most, they didn’t remember. They needed to be reminded; yet there, at the empty tomb, God’s messengers did not shame them for forgetting. They reminded them gently, “Remember how he told you?” And, thanks to this gentle reminder, they did.

**Secondary Preaching Themes**

Death is a formidable enemy. Many people have a strong fear of death, for they can neither control it nor fully understand it. We don’t know when or how we will die. We can’t fully comprehend what happens when we die. Death is a mystery that is beyond us. But, the empty tomb testifies clearly that Jesus has destroyed death. Death is not beyond Jesus; instead, Jesus is above and beyond death! And, in Christ, we will all be made alive forever.

**Responsive Offering Invitation**

ALL: **Lord Jesus, rise again within me.**

READER #1: Let your Spirit breathe life into my sin-weary soul. ALL: **Rise again within me.**

READER #2: Roll the stone away from my cold heart. ALL: **Rise again within me.**

READER #3: I offer you my heart, willing and free. ALL: **Lord Jesus, rise again within me.**

**Benediction**

*As you leave today, may you go with the knowledge that the right hand of the Lord does valiantly. You will not die but live and you will tell of the work of the Lord. You have not been given over to death. Rather, you walk in newness of life because of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. May you announce to anyone who will listen what you have seen Jesus do and what you have heard Jesus say. There is power in your simple testimony.*

**“After Ascension, Church”**

*Acts 1:1-14*



Ted A. Smith

If there’s one thing we know about Jesus, it is this: he is gone. Gone. Scripture, creeds, and cynics all agree. Jesus is gone. Our lesson from Acts gives details: “a cloud took him out of their sight” and “two men in white robes”—we might as well call them angels—attend the scene (1:9-11). Luke 24 gives the plain version: “he with- drew from them and was carried up into heaven” (v. 51 NRSV). The Gospel of John doesn’t say much about Jesus’s departure, but it remembers him talking about it all the time. “Do not hold on to me,” Jesus says to Mary in the garden (20:17 NRSV). “I’m going away,” Jesus tells the disciples (14:28). Different books tell the story in different ways, but everyone agrees: Jesus is gone.

The creeds of the church follow the witness of scripture. “He ascended into

heaven,” we say, in both the Nicene and the Apostles’ Creed. He may sit at the right

hand of the Father; he may come again in glory; but for us, for now, he’s gone.

Here is one place where belief and doubt concur. “He’s gone,” the cynic says.

“Well, isn’t *that* a handy little doctrine? You say he rose from the dead. But where is

he? He rose, but then he just flew up into heaven? Isn’t that *convenient*?” Make sense

of it how you will. But on this there is no disagreement: Jesus is gone.

❋ ❋ ❋

I believe all serious talk about the church happens in the wake of the Ascension. It begins with a recognition that Jesus is not with us as he was before. And this recogni- tion of the absence of Jesus extends to a recognition of the truth about the church. For we confess that the church is the body of Christ. And we also confess that the body of Jesus is gone, absent, ascended into heaven. To say that the body of Jesus is gone is to say that whatever else it is, the church is not *identical* to Jesus. This is not a point of abstract doctrine. It is the deep, faithful, painful recognition that our congregations, parishes, and denominations are not as they should be. It is a confession that the church has repeatedly failed to give its life for the lives of others, as Jesus did. It is an acknowledgment that—again and again, in every century—the church has failed to transcend the divisions of nation, race, class, and politics that cut across the globe. It is a recognition that church bodies have too often been conformed to this world rather than transformed by the Holy Spirit. Again and again, the church demonstrates that the body of Christ is gone. We would not tell the truth if we said anything else.

❋ ❋ ❋

**64 —**

*A Sermon on Acts 1:1-14*

Nor would we tell the truth if this was *all* that we said. The Gospel of John, especially, reminds us that the going of Jesus is inseparable from the coming of the Holy Spirit. “I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus says to the disciples. “I am coming to you” (14:18 NRSV). He promises them the gift of Advocate, Paraclete, Comforter. Jesus ascended, Ephesians says, “so that he might fill all things” (4:10 NRSV). John Calvin has these passages in mind when he writes,

Carried up into heaven, therefore, he withdrew his bodily presence from our sight, not to cease to be present with believers still on their earthly pilgrim- age, but to rule heaven and earth with a more immediate power. But by his ascension he fulfilled what he had promised: that he would be with us even to the end of the world.1

Jesus is gone. And the Spirit of Jesus has come, to fill heaven and earth with an even more immediate and intimate power, that Jesus might be with us always, even to the end of the age.

❋ ❋ ❋

Stay with me now: there’s one more move in unfolding this dialectic by which we live. Jesus is gone, the Holy Spirit has come . . . and still, more than ever, Jesus is gone. The persons of the Trinity are not interchangeable parts. They are not fungible goods. The Ascension is not like some cosmic change machine, in which we put a dollar bill in, get four quarters back, and trust that it all spends the same. We can’t lose Jesus, receive the Holy Spirit, and move along as if we had lost nothing at Calvary.

Canadian theologian Douglas Farrow says it like this: “Pentecost does not *resolve* the problem of the presence and the absence. It *creates* it, by adding a presence which discloses an absence.”2 Without the gift of the Holy Spirit, we don’t even know what we are missing. It is the presence of God in the church that lets us see the absence of God from the church. This is what I mean: it is exactly at the communion table, when God gives Godself to us most deeply, when we taste and see that the Lord is good—it is just *here* that we feel the distance of the church from God most deeply. It is as we gather around the table that we feel the absence of those many thousands gone, those enslaved bodies, those gay and lesbian bodies, those sick bodies, those criminal bodies, those poor bodies, those bodies declared illegal, that crucified body of Jesus . . . *all* those bodies—sometimes our own bodies!—that we have tried to stuff under the table and into the closet, just out of reach of our memory. The presence of God reminds us of their absence. In the presence of God, they cry out—we cry out—with the souls under the altar (Rev 6:9-11).

❋ ❋ ❋

Imaginations formed by the Ascension can think—can *live*—presence and ab- sence together. It is important to see here that presence and absence don’t strike a little deal, dividing the church between them, with presence getting these parts where things seem to be going as they should and absence getting those parts where we fall short. There is a deeper dialectic at work, and it runs through every corner of church life.

*A Sermon on Acts 1:1-14*

Thus imaginations formed by the Ascension can say no to visions of unqualified presence. They can dwell in the space of Holy Saturday, not rushing to the closure of Sunday’s Alleluia. They can hold open the space for deliberation in the meantime, the in-between time, and so refuse the easy comforts of false fulfillment.

Imaginations formed by the Ascension also say no to unqualified absence. They refuse the dime-store despair that sees only power politics at work in the church. They refuse the cheap cynicism that says things will never change. And they refuse the hubris that says it is all up to us. If they do not rush to Sunday, they also refuse to understand the Saturday in which we dwell as anything but the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the day made possible by the presence God surrenders at the cross on Friday and the day already transformed by the resurrection presence God gives on Sunday. Imaginations formed by the Ascension refuse any vision of absence that forgets that it is bracketed, disclosed, *within* the presence of God.

Christians in the wake of the Ascension see both presence and absence. We are called to sit in the dark of absence long enough that, in Howard Thurman’s glorious phrase, we see the *luminous* qualities of the darkness.3 This kind of faith does not involve finding a bright spot here or there. It comes as we see the ways that God is present in and in spite of the depths of sin and despair. For it is only by the power of God that we can name these things for what they are. They might present them- selves as worthy of our trust, the only option if we want to live, but the luminous darkness reveals that they are not. They might present themselves as eternal, but in the luminous darkness we can see that trouble does not last always. Dwelling in the luminous darkness after Ascension lets us see things as they really are. It involves receiving enough of the presence of God in the life of the church that we can’t let go, then finding ourselves broken open by the depth of the absence that presence discloses . . . and then finding ourselves, in that breaking, bound yet more tightly to the one broken for us.

Ascension faith has the tenacious patience to wait for the present fullness of Jesus’s resurrection. It can say no to the offer of every alternative, every other power that promises it can sustain the church. It can refuse every other source of community as false. It can say no to peace built on agreement about how to vote, or whom to ordain, or how to interpret scripture, or what kind of worship we prefer. Ascension faith has the courage to refuse alternatives like these. It has the tenacity to wait for the peace of Christ by the peace of Christ. Ascension faith has the capacity to *yearn.* It knows how to yearn for the risen body that we trust will come again.

❋ ❋ ❋

At the end of today’s lesson the “men of Galilee” are left staring into space. They have seen the body of Jesus ascend, and they are just waiting for him to come back. And the angels say, “Don’t just stand here looking at the sky, contemplating the dialectic between presence and absence. Jesus will return to you in the manner in which he left.” That is, he did not leave because you sent him away, and he will not return because you tell him to come back. Jesus will return when he will, because he so wills. Because of love. The men of Galilee seem to get it for a change. They do not stay to gaze into the sky. They come down from the mountain. They go back to the work of being church, back to yearning. They go back to the luminous darkness

*A Sermon on Acts 1:1-14*

of the upper room, back to the place the women have been all along. I like to think of them sitting together, breaking bread, saying prayers, and sharing possessions, there, in that upper room that they shared with Jesus, a place that he once filled so richly that they must feel his absence keenly now . . . there, in the luminous darkness of that absence, being the body of Christ as they wait for the body of Christ to come again in glory.