

Restoring Beauty

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

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Texts: Isaiah 58.1-12;
 Psalm 112.1-10;
 1 Corinthians 2.1-16;
 Matthew 5.13-20

The Sermon on the Mount is praised by many as the greatest speech of all time. Even those who do not claim the faith of Christianity find inspiration from the ethics and eloquence found in these words from Matthew's gospel. We heard the Beatitudes last Sunday, perhaps the best known portion of this teaching but today's images are a close second: "You are the salt of the earth....You are the light of the world."

To lift this teaching out of its context and declare it the greatest speech of all time misses some of the depth and nuance Jesus is sharing with his disciples and those who had gathered to hear him. Scholars believe that Jesus is speaking into a very specific conflict among the Jewish people about how they should relate to their Roman occupiers. Should they take up arms and fight as the Zealots were calling them to do? Or should they follow the lead of some of the Pharisees who hunkered down in their religious ghetto and followed every letter of the law to remain pure until the day when God would come and do a new thing among them¹?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is charting a different path for them to follow. As the sermon continues he will challenge the violence of the Zealots as he calls on them to love and pray for their enemies. And he is challenging the Pharisees as well. This is no time to retreat from life and wait for some miraculous intervention. God IS doing a new thing among them; the kingdom of heaven has come near and Jesus will show them the way into that kingdom. The Pharisees aren't entirely wrong, though. The way of the kingdom is connected to the Torah, or the law of Moses. Jesus

¹ Edwin Chr. Van Driel, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 337.

didn't come to abolish the law as some accuse him of doing. Matthew in particular is very interested in showing just how closely Jesus is connected to the traditions of Torah. With every little detail, even the location of this sermon on a mountain top, is meant to show the connections between Jesus and Moses and demonstrate the ways in which Jesus comes to fulfill and not abolish the law and the prophets.

So as I say the Pharisees aren't wrong in their instincts to turn toward the teaching of Moses and the gift of the law. They were simply misguided in what the law was meant to do. They sometimes saw the law as an end in itself; a set of traditions that would set them apart from the world around them. They believed their purity made them righteous; so they shunned anyone who might taint that purity. They kept their circle tight with a very narrow view about who was blessed by God with precious little interest to be engaged or involved in the wider world.

So what do we hear in the opening lines of the greatest speech ever made?: a radical reclaiming of the act of blessing. Our world is not so far removed from the world of those Pharisees who saw blessing as a mark of divine favor. Who did they see as the blessed among them? The powerful. The wealthy. The educated. The elite. The church in Corinth was after the very same thing: grappling for positions of honor and prestige. We live in this world as much as they do. We are not immune. Jesus words should be as shocking to us as they were to them.

When the kingdom of heaven comes near, blessing is not a sign of divine favor meant to identify a person of status. Blessing is an act that is meant to "call forth our original goodness"². Those are Henri Nouwen's words from his book *Life of the Beloved*. I shared this piece at Early Worship last week about the way that blessing functions in the gospel. He writes: "Blessing is more than a word of praise or appreciation...a blessing goes beyond the distinction between admiration or condemnation....a blessing touches the original goodness of the other and calls forth his or her Belovedness."

² Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 57.

Do you see the radical re-orientation going on here? We are invited as disciples of Christ to walk around the world looking for ways to pull forth people's original goodness; maybe because no else is noticing that goodness or maybe because they themselves have lost sight of it. You can see how this shift in perspective might put you at odds with the dominant culture around you. This is not the way of the world. Who we admire, where we expect to give and receive blessing all of this shifts for us when we begin to see the kingdom of heaven that is coming near.

And here is the point: to be fully engaged in life; not retreating to our little religious ghetto like the Pharisees did and not collaborating with dominant powers like the Sadducees did but engaging with life in a distinctive way that brings salt and light to the world. I ran across a meditation this week that was entitled *Restoring Beauty*. I stole the title as you can see. Because I thought it captured so perfectly what Jesus is teaching here and what that the Pharisees had missed. They saw the law as a means to restore order and righteousness and failed to see that the point of that order and righteousness was to restore beauty once again.

We have just come through two weeks of meditation on the creation story in our Sunday morning Bible Study. When you hear the rhythm of the creation story you hear that what is being celebrated in that text is the inherent beauty and goodness in all that God was creating. What I hear in the rest of scripture - what Jesus is seeking to recapture in the Sermon on the Mount - is the effort to which God goes to restore that beauty and goodness. If you have ever received comfort, deep, soulful comfort in the midst of grief and pain, you can testify to the beauty that moment. \

I was struck last weekend when we held the Restorative Circle training that not one but two people used the word "beautiful" to describe the impact of restorative circles. That isn't the word you'd expect from a process of conflict resolution. You might expect a word like "effective" or the word that a study in the United Kingdom used to describe Restorative Circles which was "radically efficient." But beautiful? I realized they were right, though. When you watch people who are in conflict and shut down come together and begin to speak and hear one another; when they move

through mutual understanding and begin to take responsibility and find some ways forward together.....it is a thing of beauty.

What Jesus lays out for us in the Sermon on the Mount is an invitation to become restorers of beauty. Our role is to refract the light of God, as one writer put it, by “bringing the kind of energy that gives things color.”³ That’s a rather refreshing way to look at the call to be light for the world, isn’t? Part of what I love about this idea of refracting God’s light by bringing color into the world is that it affirms the importance of protecting and promoting diversity. What you bring to the table is different from what I bring. What our church can contribute to the wellbeing of this community is different from what the church down the street can bring. The differences among us which can become sources of division or competition could instead be viewed as different frequencies, different colors of the spectrum – all refracted from the one, true light of God.

I’ve said this before, I’m sure, but I am frequently amazed by the diversity of gifts that are present in this congregation. And it’s not really something unique to our congregation. We’re just a slice of life. I suppose my amazement is at the diversity of gifts present in the world. Thank God for that diversity! Think of all the ways that we can together bring out the goodness in the people around us; that’s what being the salt of the earth is all about....letting the variety of diverse flavors come forward. We do this in classrooms, court rooms, board rooms and living rooms....as many different places as there are people.

We get handouts from the RCA from time to time telling stories from our denomination. I don’t know how many of you read them but I encourage you to do so today. This first article is a lovely story about a group of children who wanted to help build a new church. This flyer tells the story about the money they collected and donated. The coolest part of the story is the way in which the newly formed congregation hears their story and receives their gifts, literally cheering aloud for the \$24.05 these kids raised. In the eyes of the world this amount of money is nothing compared to what

³ Marcia Y. Riggs, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 332.

that congregation needs to raise. It wouldn't be worth even mentioning. But in the economy of God this a beautiful exchange of blessing.

So people of God: in the same way, but in your own way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God!