**SERMON Matthew 7:7-12, 24-29 (Narrative Lectionary, NL125)**

INTRODUCTION

You may have noticed that over the past few weeks, following the celebrations of Christmas, that we’ve been dipping in and out of the Gospel of Matthew, following the texts in the Narrative Lectionary. We started early in January with Jesus’ baptism, which inaugurates Jesus’ ministry. Then very quickly, the writer of Matthew, jumps into a particular collection of Jesus’ most famous teachings that have been gathered into what we now call, The Sermon on the Mount. In it we find The Beatitudes (5:3-11), the passage on Salt and Light (5:13-16), Love your Enemy (5:43-48) – that’s a big one. The Lord’s Prayer (6:9-13) is in there, The Golden Rule (that we just heard in chapter 7 verse 12). It’s all pretty familiar, to at least some of us, and that’s actually the danger inherent in The Sermon on the Mount. These teachings of Jesus can become so familiar that they lose their power, not because the words are deficient, but because we grow insensitive to the shock that they actually deliver. So, let’s pray before we jump in, pray that we can rekindled some of their original impact:

Loving God,…awake the sleeper in me, stir the seeker, the searcher for wisdom and goodness…

In my study this week I stumbled upon a sermon by Tim Mackie on the Sermon on the Mount. In it he shared a quote by an Orthodox Jewish Rabbi that stated that: “The history of Christianity is a history of Christians trying to evade The Sermon on the Mount and avoid living according to its plain meaning” [REPEAT]. Oomph! I mean, we just read how Jesus’ original audience felt when they heard his words. Look again at verses 28 and 29, it says “When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he was teaching them like someone with authority and not like their legal experts.” Now, the word translated here as “amazed” in Greek is more like, “to be out of mind” – their minds were blown. They didn’t have a category for the kinds of things that these teachings raised inside of them. It both bothered them and impressed them. Jesus blew their minds. And why? Well, it was related to his authority, the fact that he said things like, “This is what the Torah says…and this is what I say.” But it wasn’t just his authority. It also had something to do with the *kinds* of things Jesus was addressing. His stories, his instruction, his life connected with people in such a way that they were compelled to live differently.

LINKING ILLUSTRATION

Perhaps an image will help us see what Jesus was able to do through his words and actions. You may have wondered why on earth there’s a picture of an iceberg on the bulletin. Well, another commentator used this image and I found it really helpful. So, now you folks get this image. You’ve all likely seen these photographs of icebergs before that are both above and below water. They’re just remarkable, these gigantic ice mountains floating in the Arctic Ocean, weighing (they tell us) thousands of metric tons. And what makes us interested in these photographs, is this the relationship between what you can see from the surface and what is invisible underneath. So, if you’re above water only, you’ve really no clue, no perception of what is underneath, keeping what’s on the surface afloat.

LINK BACK TO THE TEXT

And it seems to me that the image of an iceberg captures some of what Jesus is able to do in and through his teachings, authoritative teachings that somehow connect to the heart of human nature. It seems that he is consistently able to observe human behavior, what is visible for everyone to see (like the surface of an iceberg) AND then in a quick turn of a phrase, a metaphor or a single question, Jesus manages to identify exactly what drives that behavior. He’s able to discern the motivations, the values and the impulses that are the *in*visible parts of ourselves. Jesus is able –again and again and again– to expose, human beings in all our brokenness and conflicted-ness, particularly when it comes to our relationships with others. That ‘mega-ton’ mass under the surface, just like an iceberg, is revealed and Jesus says the Kingdom of God, the KIN-dom of God, will be characterized by people who courageously and vulnerably open up their whole selves to God, especially the parts of ourselves that the Kingdom of Mortals, human power structures want us to hide. Why?

Because it is only when we get honest about our desires, our arrogance and pride, our hurt, our pain, and the shame that builds up around them that we can eventually be free. Free to be fully human, free to be in authentic relationship, with God and others.

WHISTLESTOP TOUR OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

So, how does Jesus do this? Well from the very beginning of the Sermon of the Mount, he does this thing where he states what the Torah says, he affirms it, and then in his own authority plunges deeper. Here’s a few examples:

In Chapter 5 verse 21, it reads “You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, ‘Don’t commit murder,’ and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their sibling or calls them an idiot (a ‘nothing,’ is a more accurate translation of the Greek) will be in danger of judgment. *Do you see what he’s doing here?* He is saying, yes of course you should not murder someone. Congratulations you haven’t killed anyone. Does that make you a good human? For Jesus, what is comparing what is above, and beneath the surface. So, when someone murders someone they have a view of themselves as having some sort of right, or authority, or elevated status over the existence or life of another human, such that they can erase it or snuff them out. **But** Jesus says, think about what happens when you call someone a nothing, an idiot, a fool [PAUSE]. For Jesus, the ‘mega-ton’ mass that is *in*visible from the surface is pride and contempt, and he’s saying that that is what needs to be addressed. It seems that what Jesus is exposing in human beings is the dangers of thinking that we are somehow better than someone else, more deserving of rights and freedoms, more deserving of privileges and success. And that when we elevate ourselves above another person like that, we can justify all kinds of words and actions against other person, that demonizes and dehumanizes them.

We see him doing this deep dive again a little differently later in chapter 6 verse 19. Matthew records Jesus as saying, “Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead,” I say to you, “collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don’t eat them and where thieves don’t break in and steal them.” Again, Jesus is comparing what is visible on the surface, with what cannot be seen underneath. He highlights the futility and greed of accumulating perishable, material things for one’s own personal benefit. It’s almost the same as how he addressed murder, pride, and contempt. He’s saying that when we view ourselves as better than someone else, more deserving of stuff than someone else, more deserving of ready access to resources, healthy food, reliable shelter, good working conditions, paid time off, the ability to accumulate wealth and security…when we can justify the collection of those treasures for our own benefit, then Jesus says, then “there your heart will be also” (6:21). Your heart will be closed off to the needs of others because your heart will be focused on “collecting treasures for your own benefit” (6:19). And the matters of the heart are exactly what Jesus is getting at when he dives beneath the surface, to see what is motivating human behaviors. What is undermining our ability to be in authentic, non-transactional relationships with others.

Now, in chapter 7 verse 1, Jesus says, “Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged…why do you see the splinter that’s in your sibling’s eye, don’t notice the log in your own eye?” And here Jesus zones into what he’s been talking about throughout this Sermon on the Mount, he says “You deceive yourself!” (7:5) when you presume to be able to take a speck out of someone else’s eye without first dealing with the log in your own eye. Folks, it is great when you can see what is wrong in someone else, and out in the world, **but** Jesus is imploring us to do the heavy lifting of continual self-reflection, so that we are right sized in our own minds. That we can see our own faults and failings clearly. That we do the work to understand our character defects and work to practice healthier ways of being in the world and in relationship with other imperfect human beings. This is not about self-debasement; this is about equity. Jesus says, in chapter 7 verse 12, “Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets.”

THE GOOD NEWS

But don’t worry, we are not simply abandoned in our vulnerability. Jesus doesn’t expose the imperfections of human nature simply to condemn us or punish us, completely the opposite in fact. Jesus invites us to do that work of unearthing our hidden motives and causes for shame, to do the work that God has been doing from the very beginning of time, to free us, to liberate us from the weight of trying to be something or someone we’re not. Jesus proposes a new Way to be human. And a new way to be in community together. A community that has a completely different standard of generosity and compassion, love and justice.

A Way where the quality of our relationships and the integrity of our characters align. A Way that’s only possible after deep introspection and radical honestly. A Way of being human that has grace for ourselves as well as for the other person. A Way that nurtures a clear conscience and a pure heart. A Way that prizes care and compassion, that understands weakness and frailty not as shameful aspects that need to be forces under the surface, hidden from sight, but as the parts of us that are the most human.

CONCLUDE WITH OUR TEXT

Matthew has Jesus ending the Sermon on the Mount, in verse 24-29, with what is essentially a summary of why one should listen to these teachings. Beginning with a shorten parable (the first parable in the Gospel) stating that everyone who hears his words and then *acts* on them is like someone who is wise and builds their house upon the bedrock. This phrasing is important. It is the one who *both* hears and does who is wise. Matthew here is weaving the command to hear and obey the words of Jesus with echoes of the commands to hear and obey found in the Law of the Hebrew Bible, all the way back to when the Israelites, with Moses.

Church, we find ourselves in a long lineage of faulted, imperfect human beings. And in this very human and messed up story, let not our brokenness be an excuse to evade the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount. Instead may we pay attention to our God who has repeatedly challenged us to step out with courage, to brave vulnerability, to open ourselves up to deeper more vital relationships with one another and with our Creator. Because the Kin-dom of God can only expand and grow when we…not just heard these words but put them into action.