

Really?

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The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
The Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Holy Communion
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Micah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

“Blessed are. . . .” -- Matthew 5

Do you think Jesus meant what he said when he said that the poor in spirit are blessed? Or when he said that those who mourn are blessed? Or that the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and the merciful, and the pure in heart, and the peacemakers, and those persecuted for righteousness' sake, and even us, when people mistreat us because of Jesus – do you think Jesus meant it when he said that all these folks are blessed? Really?

Harry Truman apparently thought so. He seemed to think that Jesus said what he meant and he meant what he said, and President Truman is reported to have said about Jesus's words, “I do not believe there is a problem in this country or the world today which could not be settled if approached through the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.”

Really? Most Christians, even some heavy-hitters like Martin Luther, didn't share Mr. Truman's estimate of the relevance of Jesus's words to the so-called real world. Luther said that Jesus's words constituted an ideal that ordinary Christians couldn't live up to in this world, and most people in the Middle Ages thought that Jesus's words applied only to the people in religious orders – priests, monks, nuns, and suchlike – but not to the rank-and-file Christian. The standard Jesus set was impossibly high, went the thinking of those days, except for Jesus himself, Son of God, Messiah, Savior, Spiritual Superman.

Really? I'm skeptical about Luther's “two kingdoms” approach to the Christian faith, which says that we Christians live by one set of values in the kingdom of heaven – where we don't get to use force – and another set of values in the kingdom of this world – where we do. A render-unto-Caesar-and-render-unto-God sort of thing. I know Jesus expressed such an idea, but I certainly don't think he intended for it to evolve into a kind of moral schizophrenia.

I said a couple of weeks ago that if faith isn't personal, it's not faith, and I'll say today that if faith isn't public, it's not faith. You can't very well be the light of the world, which Jesus calls us to be, if you've got your light under a bushel basket – or operating only in the kingdom of heaven. If you don't bring the values of those teachings of Jesus from the kingdom of heaven into the kingdom of this world, what's the point of having them? Just so you can get to heaven someday? Isn't that simply a spiritualized form of works righteousness, the kind of religion that says, “I'll do this for you now, God, if you'll do that, someday, for me”? And isn't that a form of Christianity that has the gospel all backwards?

As I read the story of Jesus's life, and as I meditate on his teachings, I see him out

there mixing it up with the world, getting himself into lots of trouble with the kingdom of this world for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. I don't see that quiet passion that incurs real risk among many of us today who claim to be his followers. I think perhaps in places like Christian America we've rendered way too much unto Caesar and the good opinions of our neighbors, and not nearly enough unto God.

I owe this morning's sermon not only to Jesus, but also to the members of Congress who, in 1962, decided to have the words "In God We Trust" emblazoned in bronze above the speaker's rostrum in the House of Representatives. I don't know if any of you noticed those words behind President Obama during his speech the other night, but since you pay me to be on the lookout for such things, the words caught my eye, and I found myself wondering, "Really? Do we Americans really trust in God, like it says on our money, or is it rather the money itself in which we trust? Or in those who control the money? Or in those who control the affairs of state or the military? In whom, really, do we trust?"

Right now, it looks to me like we trust guns more than we trust just about anything else, and for the life of me, I can't seem to work that out of the gospel. I've looked and looked and looked and I just don't see using violence to protect ourselves against the violence of others in the life or teachings of Jesus. I guess that makes me a kind of fundamentalist, which is a scary word these days, but I've been called worse.

Those were the sorts of thoughts and questions I was turning over the other night, along with the question of whether most of us really believe that it is the poor in spirit who are blessed, or any of the other types of folks Jesus lists in the Beatitudes. Being poor in spirit certainly isn't the way most of us understand being blessed. We tend to think of the wonderful things we enjoy in life – our families, our friends, our neighborhoods, all the sorts of things I mention when I lead the prayers here – when we think of being blessed. Do we really believe that Jesus was telling the truth when he turned that understanding inside out? Really?

Did you really mean it, Jesus, when you said that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's realm? Really?

Did you really mean it, Jesus, when you said that "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26)? Really?

Did you really mean it, Jesus, when you said that everyone who lives and believes in you will never die (John 11:26)? Really?

Surely, I'm not the only Christian who's asked those kinds of questions, and I'm not the only Christian who's considered seriously the possibility that to every time someone asks, "Really?" Jesus the crucified and risen Christ answers, "Really." Jesus said what he meant and he meant what he said. Really.

So did the prophet Micah eight hundred years before Jesus. And so did Paul about thirty years after Jesus. And so did all the others whose words and deeds have been cherished and preserved by the Christian church in the pages of our two testaments. Scripture is serious because it is the product of the church, that institution the poet Philip Larkin called "a serious house on serious earth." That's us, the people who make up the house of the church and take seriously such words as "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

We may not fully understand what such words mean – even that super-Jew-turned-super-Christian Paul said that we see in a mirror dimly in this world – but we continue to read them out in public worship, ask our preachers to expound on them, and lay claim to them as the lodestars of our lives.

Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount may constitute an ideal impossible to live fully all the time – maybe – but what I've come to see over half a century of trying is

that it is the ideal we attempt to live more than the ideal we fail to live that matters most in determining who we are.

Some of you may have read in *Parade* magazine a few weeks ago the interview with some champion ice skaters. One of them, Scott Hamilton, reflected on what his skating career taught him about life, and this is what he said: "I think what sets skaters apart is we have to get up a lot. . . . We fall down all the time, and we get up. If anything is following me from my skating career into my life, it's the getting up."

Friends, I know that all of us here this morning have fallen again and again from the ideals to which God calls us and even from our senses of our own best selves. There's not one of us here this morning or any morning who can truthfully say, "I am, at last, the new creation God has always intended me to be." And because none of us can say that, and because we know that we and we alone are responsible for our own faults and falls, there will always be a place in our worship services for the confession of our sins.

And however seriously you take those moments of public and private confession – and I hope you take them very seriously indeed – I hope you will take even more seriously the opportunity that honest confession provides to get up, start over, and try again. For when all is said and done, it's the broken in spirit, and not the spiritually successful, Jesus called blessed. Really? Really.