

The Way — Proclaiming the Kingdom A House Built on a Rock

Matthew 5:1-2; 7:24-29
The 3rd Sunday in Lent - February 28, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams

What was the central focus of Jesus' message? Was it the gift of eternal life? Forgiveness of sins? Love and mercy? Believing in Jesus as the Son of God? In his book, *The Way*, Adam Hamilton reminds us that Jesus talked about something he called the "kingdom of God" more than he talked about forgiveness, sin and even love *combined* (p. 76). The central focus of Jesus' message was an invitation to participate in the *basileia tou theou* — which is better understood not so much as a kingdom — a place somewhere out there — but rather the kingship, reign or rule of God. Jesus' life among us, his healing ministry, and his teaching show us what the kingship of God looks like here and now in everyday life. Jesus casts a vision of what can and will happen when we participate in God's kingship. Jesus' central message was come and follow me in letting God be the king and ruler of your life.

Today's Gospel reading consists of the opening and closing verses of the Sermon on the Mount. It is here that Jesus describes most clearly what God's kingship is all about, and the impact that it can and will have on the lives of individuals and communities. So take out your pew Bibles and turn to page 785, and we will walk through some of the key points in this most famous of Jesus' sermons.

Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the beatitudes, a series of blessings that publicly affirm the honor, worth and dignity of certain categories of people who were/are generally not well regarded in society (5: 3-12). Jesus says to people whose spirits are broken, to people who are mourning and grieving, who are meek and powerless, who hunger and thirst for right relations, who are pure in heart, who are peacemakers, who are ridiculed, slandered and persecuted unjustly — God is with you, God is for you, and so you are blessed, you are worthy of love and respect. You are good enough.

In 5:14-16, Jesus tells these people: "you are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world." Not you can be or ought to be or will be, but you **are** right here, right now, the salt of the earth, so be salty, make your world tasty, preserve it from spoiling. You are right here, right now the light of the world, stop hiding your light under a bushel basket, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Salt and light here are metaphors for our ability to make a positive difference in the world around us even if and when we are broken in spirit, grieving, powerless, hungry and thirsting, ridiculed, slandered or persecuted. You are good enough, and you have the ability to make a positive difference.

Jesus then turns to “the law and the prophets” (5:17), telling his audience that he has come not to get rid of the scriptures handed down by their ancestors, but to fulfill them, to bring them to their designed end or completion. The law (think 10 commandments and so forth) were given to God’s people to help them live in right relations with God and with each other. Jesus’ mission is to go further and deeper, to get at the root causes of things like murder, adultery, divorce, the need for oaths, revenge, and having enemies. Jesus’ invitation to participate in the kingship of God is about changing our hearts, helping us let go of anger and insults, learning to forgive and be forgiven, learning to see each other as beloved children of God not sexual objects, learning to speak the simple truth, learning to respond with kindness in the face of evil, learning to love our enemies.

Jesus concludes his discussion of the law and commandments by inviting his audience to be *teleios* as our Father in heaven is *teleios* (5:48). Often translated as “perfect”, the word *teleios* describes being fully developed, grown up, mature, complete, whole. We might consider translating the word *teleios* as integrity — the quality of being whole, complete and undivided. Integrity manifests itself in consistency of character and behavior. The good news of the beatitudes continues with Jesus’ assurance that he has come to help us grow up, mature and lead lives of consistency that reflect God’s integrity and wholeness.

The sermon on the mount continues in chapters six and seven where Jesus presents a diagnosis of the human condition. All too often we behave like hypocrites, engaging in sacred practices just to draw attention to ourselves. Giving alms, prayer and fasting are matters between us and God yet we turn them into spectacles (6:1-18). We store up treasures on earth (6:19-21), and try to serve two masters, dividing our loyalties between God and wealth, between family and work, between our loved ones (6:24). We worry too much about things that won’t add a minute to the length or depth of our existence (6:25-34). We judge others and try to fix them while ignoring the mess in our own lives (7:1-5). Jesus calls all this hypocrisy — saying one thing and doing another. Hypocrisy is the opposite of integrity. All too often our actions and behavior reveal that we are divided within ourselves, conflicted, and confused, lacking inner consistency and wholeness. In this condition it is hard to be salt for the earth, it is difficult to shine.

To help us be the salt and the light that we really are, Jesus provides us with a prayer and a rule. The very first thing Jesus teaches us to pray for is the coming of God’s *basileia*, to ask God to take charge of our lives, to help us grow up and mature, become whole and complete, empowered to do God’s will here and now on earth just as it is already being done in heaven (6:10). When we pray for the coming of God’s rule in our lives, we are praying for integrity, for the ability not to just talk the talk but to walk the talk. Jesus assures us that God will respond to this prayer, that like a loving parent God yearns to give us good gifts, and is just waiting for us to turn to him (7:7-11). The rule is the golden rule: “In everything do to others as you would want them to do to you” (7:12). It is a good rule for acting with integrity, and avoiding hypocrisy.

Jesus warns us about the danger of taking the easy way out, of avoiding the hard work that leads to a life of wholeness (7:13-14). He warns us of the danger of false prophets who talk the talk but

don't walk the talk. Jesus says you will know them by their fruits - their behavior and actions will not match up with what they claim to believe and value (7:15-20). In fact, Jesus warns there are even people who call themselves disciples but who do not do the will of God. Even spectacular activities like prophesying, casting out demons, and performing deeds of power in the name of Jesus are meaningless if those who do them do not do God's will (7:21-23).

Jesus concludes the sermon on the mount: "Everyone then who hears those words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock" (7:24-25).

Jesus' word delivered in the sermon on the mount is the rock on which the wise build their houses. What is that word? God is with you, God is for you. You are blessed. You are worthy of love and respect, even when your spirit is broken, you are grieving, powerless, hungry, thirsty, ridiculed, slandered or persecuted. You are good enough. You are salt for the earth. You are the light of world. Let your light shine. Ask for God's *basileia*, God's kingship in your life to help you grow and mature, free of inner division, conflict and confusion, free of hypocrisy. Treat everyone you meet with the same love and respect you want to receive from them. Jesus does not promise a life free of problems, in fact he says the road that leads to life is hard. What Jesus offers is a life of integrity built on a foundation that will withstand whatever storms and disasters you encounter on that road. Thanks be to God!