

Jesus' Kingdom Agenda

Matthew 5:1-20

We might well imagine people saying to themselves as they first heard about the so-called prophet or rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, *“Well, here’s another new teacher who thinks he’s got the answer to our problems. We’ve already got plenty of teachers of the Law of God. We’ve got the Pharisees who think their interpretation is the right one. What’s different about this Jesus?”* Jesus gives a straightforward answer. *“Yes, indeed, the scribes and the Pharisees do indeed teach a way of being faithful to God, a way of behaving in accordance with God’s covenant. They have taught it for years, and you grew up with it. But I tell you, your righteousness--your way of living before God--must exceed theirs if you are to enter the kingdom of God,”* (5:20).

And if we ask Jesus, *“Why?”* Jesus is telling us, *“The old way is not sufficient for life in God’s kingdom. It won’t fit, it won’t do, it isn’t righteous enough.”* The Jewish religious system at the time was kept in place by authoritative religious powers. The scribes were religious scholars. The Pharisees taught the Jewish Law to the people. The Sadducees ran the Temple. First of all, it was strictly Jewish. You had to be a Jew or convert to it in order to be accepted--accepted as God’s people and then to stand vindicated by God in the day of judgment. BUT the kingdom Jesus preached was open for all people--for everyone, from any background, from anywhere.

Secondly, the Jewish authorities believed that not only were Gentiles out, but according to the Jewish Law--as interpreted--a lot of Jews were out also. So, they made sure they kept themselves “pure”--as they understood it--and kept others away from knowing God’s mercy--men and women of any questionable character, people with

various kinds of disease (leprosy, irregular bleeding or wounds, incurable diseases of various kinds, mental and physical). BUT as Jesus showed in his ministry, all such “impure” people were healed and welcomed when they came to him who proclaimed God’s Kingdom for them.

Thirdly, the Jewish system had no offer of God’s mercy to people who had sinned beyond the Law’s provision. That is, certain sins could not be forgiven (murder, adultery, sacrilege) and certain kinds of persons were not permitted reconciliation with God by the priests in the Temple at all (Samaritans, prostitutes, tax collectors, among others). BUT in the kingdom Jesus was bringing, again all of those people were found a word of hope and grace at the invitation of Jesus. In other words, the Jewish system of the Law and its administration and the new Kingdom of God Jesus was preaching and demonstrating could not be fitted together. The righteousness “way” of the former was not righteous enough, wide enough, or gracious enough for the new “way” of Jesus.

Let me compare it to something in our own southern past. Most of us here grew up in the segregated South. From one point of view, life was good. Things seemed to be---for most of us--in order. Everyone knew their place. But, from another point of view--from the African-American experience--it was not a just and good system. And most of us--or our parents certainly--knew at some levels that it wasn’t all good. In fact, living in the segregated south was like living on top of a boiler, wondering if and hoping it wouldn’t explode. And even though at some level, everyone knew better, sad to say, we accepted it, lived with it, and made others conform to it. Let me make a comparison.

Vice President of the United States, Joe Biden of Delaware, tells a wonderful story from his career in the Senate. He says, “*When I first arrived in the Senate in 1972*

as a 29-year-old new senator, I went to see John Stennis, the old Mississippi senator. We sat on the end of this gigantic, grand mahogany table he used as his desk that had been in the office of Senator Richard Russell of Georgia. It was the table upon which the Southern Manifesto against Civil Rights was signed. Senator Stennis patted the leather chair next to him and he said, 'Sit down. Sit down here,' And he looked at me and said, "Son, what made you run for the Senate?" And like a darn fool I told him the truth...I said, 'Civil rights, sir.' And as soon as I did, I could feel the beads of perspiration pop out of my head. And he looked at me and said, 'Good, good, good.'" And that was the end of the conversation for then. Well, in 18 years together in the Senate, we had long become good friends. I saw again him in his office when he was leaving the Senate. Because of my seniority, I was getting his office. I went in and sat down and he looked at me as if it were yesterday and he said, 'Sit down, Joe, sit down,' and tapped the chair next to him. And he said something that startled me. He said, 'Remember the first time you came to see me, Joe?' And I shook my head, I didn't remember. And he leaned close to me and recited the whole story. Then he said, 'You're going to take my office, aren't you?' And I said, 'Yes sir, Mr. Chairman.' And he ran his hand back and forth across that historic mahogany table in a loving way and he said, 'You see this table, Joe?' And I said, 'Yes sir, Mr. Chairman.' He said, 'This table was the flagship of the Confederacy from 1954 to 1968. We sat here, most of us from the deep South, the old Confederacy, and we planned the demise of the Civil Rights movement.' Then he looked at me and said, 'And now it's time that this table go from the possession of a man who was against civil rights to a man who is for civil rights.' Biden says, 'I was stunned.' And Stennis then said, 'One more thing, Joe. The Civil

*Rights movement did more to free the white man than the black man.’ And I looked at him and I didn’t know what he meant, and in only John Stennis fashion, he said, ‘It freed my soul; it freed my soul.’” (Joseph Biden, **Promises to Keep**, 2007).*

I tell that story because at some point, Stennis knew the old system had to go. It had worked--but only for some, and at the terrible expense of others. The time came to widen the freedom of life and pursuit of happiness for all Americans. Similarly, Jesus was saying the old Jewish Law system must go. The new Kingdom of God and the whole system can’t go along together. As Jesus would say elsewhere, “*No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old coat*” and “*Neither is new wine put into old wineskins,*” (Mt 9:16-17). Jesus--with his Kingdom proclamation and actions--was starting a revolution. But it was different from all other conventional revolutions with their violence and power grabbing. And Jesus had to do two things as he ministered this new kingdom. He had to show the Jews --some of who listened and some who didn’t--that his movement really was the fulfillment of that Israel believed and hoped for--BUT in the right way. 2d, he had to show that he and his followers were living by, and willing to die by, this new Way.

Now then another way Jesus was getting at this was in the verses, “*You are the salt of the earth*” and “*You are the light of the world,*” (vss.13-16). God had called Israel to be the light of the world. Isaiah 42:6--“*I have given you, [Israel], as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations...*”; and Isaiah 49:6--“*you should be my servant....I give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth...*” Israel was the people appointed through whom God intended to shine his bright light into the world’s dark corners, to simply to show up evil but to enable people who were

blund-ering around in the dark to find their way. But, in reality, Israel had become pretty much like all other nations, it had become a contributor to the darkness. Jerusalem, the city set on a hill, was supposed to be the beacon of hope to the world. God's people were to be like that--their deep, heartfelt faith keeping God's laws as a sign to the nations that the one true God, the creator-redeemer God of Israel, was God indeed, and that they should worship him. But instead, Israel had turned in upon itself, thinking it was being God's people as a matter of privilege, rather than service. The "salt" had lost its flavor, and was no good for what it was supposed to be. Israel was behaving badly like everyone else, with its power politics, its factional squabbling, and its recurrent militant revolutions. This is what Jesus was getting at, and He was announcing God was doing something new.

When you realize this kind of background to Jesus' teaching, you can begin to understand just how radical and different Jesus' words in the Beatitudes really were--and are! People often say what a wonderful teacher Jesus was, and that if only people would obey him, the world would be a better place. *Well, Yeahhhh!* But that's not what is going on here. Jesus is not telling people how to better behave. Firstly, he is announ-cing--DECLARING---the blessings that happen in the Kingdom of God He is preaching and demonstrating in its power.

I mean if you really look at these words, you can see they are not some sort of set of timeless truths that if people would just put them into practice, and "voila!", everything turns out alright. If Jesus was saying that, he was wrong. Think about it. In this world as is, those who mourn often go uncomforted. The meek do not inherit the world; in fact, they better get out of the way, if they don't want to be run over! Those

who long for justice frequently do not see it happen in their lifetime or suffer horribly for standing for it. Nelson Mandella was 27 years in prison in South Africa for wanting a free and just country for all. Martin Luther King was assassinated right up the road because he came here in support of decent wages for the Memphis garbage men. The world--from God's point of view--is upside down in its sin, injustice, and death. It shouldn't be that way.

But here is the good news! In God's kingdom--beginning in Jesus--upside down is right side up. God is about doing a new thing. A new era in the midst of this world is happening, and we are called to be part of it. And when you become part of it, all the conventional controls people thought they knew about work the other way round. In the world as it is, most people think that really wonderful news consists of success, wealth, long life, victory in wars, and the like. But Jesus says there is much better news to be heard and it is for the poor, the mourners, the meek, and others the world doesn't count "blessed" or "happy." That's what the word Beatitude means, from the Latin word *beatus* meaning "blessed", blessed from God and with a really blessed result--that is, vis a vis the Kingdom of God. Hence, his word in this sermon a little later, "*Seek first the kingdom...*" (6:33).

And when do such blessings manifest themselves? The good news?! First of all, Now! NOW! The Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God, is a reality NOW, Jesus proclaims! A reality, in part to be sure, but still a reality to know experience, and to experience with others. Christians, those who believe in and follow Jesus, are to live the life that comes from God in Heaven--here and now. "*Christ is king, so live like it, in so far as you can. Let the kingdom of God's ways show*

themselves in your lives” The life of heaven--the life of the realm where God is already king--is to become reality in the world now.

HOW? *By the power of Christ.* By the power of Christ, we are to live and transform the present ‘earth’ into the place of harmony and delight that God always intended. That’s the point of these ‘beatitudes,’ in particular. They are a summons to live in the present way that makes sense of God’s promised future--“*Thy kingdom come...on earth.*” It may seem upside down to believe and do as Jesus says, but upside down is right side up after all.

Hear Eugene Peterson’s rendering of the Beatitudes in his *Message* version (Mt 5:1-12): “*You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.*

You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are--no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being care-full, you find yourselves cared for.

You’re blessed when you get your inside world--your mind and heart--put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s Kingdom. Not only that--count yourselves blessed

every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens--give a cheer, even!--for thought they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble."

I think what Jesus describes--and calls us to--is very different from what many Christians envision and have been taught. Many think that it's about getting blessed, when Jesus teaches, if you really want the blessing of God, be a blessing to and for others. For the Beatitudes are declarations about life in the Kingdom, a kingdom that is "other" oriented. Similarly, Jesus told his disciples to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world." That is, he was teaching them to be as he himself was. He told them that their practice of God's will in the world had to be known and experience and practiced--those new realities we see declared in the Beatitudes. The kingdom Jesus proclaims did not seek to violently overthrow Rome, because his kingdom was/is an alternative to the violence of Rome and any other power. But as such, the kingdom of Jesus cannot avoid being subversive. It undercuts the ways of the world, the ways we are so used to and too often find difficult to part with. Yet, where Jesus' people truly heed his words--and experience them--there comes into the world a society with distinction. It presents a new kind of Living to the world that is nothing less than life-liberating. Such is Jesus' Kingdom agenda. And when we do, we can understand, as Senator Stennis joyfully said, *"it frees the soul, it frees the soul."* In fact, it frees the world. It frees the world. Amen.

