

Dear Gulf Coast Leaders,

January 18-20 - [Week of Prayer for Christian Unity](#)

January 30, 2011 - Epiphany 4A

Micah 6:1-8 - He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Psalms 15 - Blamelessness defined as doing no slander or evil, not lending money at interest, not taking bribes: O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors; in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the Lord; who stand by their oath even to their hurt; who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 - Repeats verse 18 from last week and continues: ...Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

Matthew 5:1-12 - The Beatitudes, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, which will continue for the next five weeks.

The Beatitudes: Jesus' First Sermon

This is the text for the Bible Study delivered to the Tri-Synodical Theological Conference, held January 24-26 in Galveston, Texas for the pastors and church leaders of Texas and Louisiana congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Grace to you and peace, brothers and sisters in Christ. Luther the first thing to do when studying Scripture is to invoke and call upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so I invite you to pray with me in song:



Munib Younan, Lutheran Bishop of the Holy Land, and LWF President invites the Pope to help with a balanced 500th remembrance of the Reformation

OF NOTE

[Interfaith Service for Immigration Reform](#) January 27 at Christ the King Houston

[Congregational Reports](#) due February 15

[Rostered Leader Reports](#) due February 15

[Health Assessment](#) due April 15

[Bishop Younan invites Pope](#) to ecumenical Reformation remembrance

[Books](#)

[Lectionary Readings](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

January 24-26 - [TriSynodical Theological Conference](#), Marcus Borg. Galveston. Books to read:

1. [The Heart of Christianity](#).

2. [Toward a Hopeful Future](#).

January 27 - [Immigration Prayer Service](#) at Christ the King Houston, 10 a.m.

February 19 and 26 - Dialog: Racism

Grace Lutheran Church, Houston, TX, 9-4.

Sponsored by the CENTER FOR HEALING OF RACISM

Register: 713-520-8226 or cfhr1@juno.com

May 20-22 - [Synod Assembly](#)

August 14-20 - Churchwide Assembly

Leadership Gatherings (Saturday only this year):

August 6 - Houston

August 13 - Brenham

August 27 - New Orleans

Veni Sancte Spiritus (ELW 406)

Creator God we give you thanks for all the blessings of this life. Open our hearts and minds to hear with fresh ears the words that come down to us through the ages, and give us the courage to live them in our lives and communities of faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jesus First Sermon.

Monday is sermon day for me. Once written it has the whole week to cook. As Craig Satterlee says, "Sermons are meant for the slow cooker, not the microwave." Theological Conference always cuts into sermon prep time. So our Bible study this morning is on the gospel reading for this coming Sunday, If there is anything you can use here, steal away. No need to credit me. I stole it too, primarily from Mark Allen Powell in *God With Us*, Kingsbury in *Matthew as Story*, and Marty Stortz and Ralph Klein in lectures given to the Lutheran bishops from Canada and the U.S. last week. The full text of my comments today is easy to find. Just go to BishopMike.com.

The text is Matthew 5, The Beatitudes, or what Robert Schuller called "The Be-Happy Attitudes." Now before you make fun of that, I would point out that while this smacks of self-help gospel, as if Jesus and the Beatitudes were really all about making ME happy, rather than calling me to die to myself and live sacrificially, I have to admit his title has stuck with me for 20 years. There is something to be said for crafting sermons in memorable ways - ways that stick with people, using alliteration, simile and mind-capturing images.

I chose a different title. I'm calling it **Jesus' First Sermon**. Now, I know the Sermon on the Mount is likely an amalgamation of Jesus' various sayings, but it is the first of five great discourses in Matthew, so I like "**Jesus' First Sermon**." I don't know if you remember your first sermon or not. I have mine, and trust me, it isn't this good.



Come away with me to a quiet place... Mark 6:31

In the lectionary we are about to spend five weeks in Sermon on the Mount, this Sunday and the entire month of February, so we'll also look ahead a little bit this morning, to the rest of Jesus' First Sermon.

The Matthean Beatitudes appear twice in this year's lectionary: this Sunday and then again this Fall, on All Saints Sunday, November 6. They are the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and perhaps the moral foundation for all of Jesus' teaching in Matthew. In front of you is a placemat with our text in Greek, English and Spanish. [Beatitudes Placemat](#)

Let's begin by reading this text together in English. I'll read the first two verses. Then I'd like to invite those on my right to read the boldface print, and those on my left to read the standard print... Ready?

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you

and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The Beatitudes form the foundation of Jesus' ethical teaching in Matthew.

So, a question for you to discuss. Are the beatitudes:

1. **Eschatological rewards for the virtuous?** In other words, do this and you will be rewarded in heaven. Be a peacemaker, work for righteousness and you'll be rewarded.
2. **Eschatological reversal for those who are suffering?** In other words, if you're poor now, you'll be rich in heaven. If you're mourning now, you'll be dancing in heaven. If you're hungry now, you'll be full in heaven.

What do you think? Turn to someone next to you and share your thoughts. Are these rewards for those who live a virtuous life or reversals for those who have unfortunate circumstances?

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Mark Alan Powell (*God With Us*) points out that if we look carefully, neither interpretation fits all of these. Being poor, hungry or mourning don't sound like a virtues to which we are to aspire, and being a peacemaker is not an unfortunate circumstance of suffering that needs to be reversed in the eschaton.

A closer look reveals the first eight beatitudes (vv. 3-10) are written in the third person, while vv. 11-12, the ninth beatitude is written in the second person. Both the first and the eighth beatitude end with "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," underlined for you, creating a rhetorical inclusio. 11-12 are also different in meter, style and imperative mood.

Verses 3-10 can be divided into two sections that have exactly 36 words each in the Greek:

- The four beatitudes in verses 3-6 (in the yellow) have exactly 36 words, and
- the second four beatitudes in verses 7-10 have exactly 36 words, and
- the last beatitude, verses 11-12 have 35 words.

So, let's call

- vv. 3-6 in yellow Stanza 1
- vv. 7-10 in turquoise Stanza 2
- vv. 11-12 in pink the Conclusion

Immediately you'll notice both stanza one and stanza two end with the word **δικαιοσύνην**(dikaiosyne). Which I have put in a white box for you. This word means justice, or righteousness. Notice the NRSV translates it righteousness here, but the Spanish translates it "justicia."

The symmetry, poetry and parallelism are artistic and clearly intentional. Obviously Robert Schuller is not the only one who can craft memorable sermons. Could this have been an early hymn?

Also note the alliteration of 3-6, each verse starting with a "p" word, which I have circled for you.

πτωχοὶ Ptochoi (poor)

πενθουντες Penthountes (mourners)

πραεις Praes (meek)

πεινωντες Peinontes (hungry)

Blessed are the pathetic, poor, parched people.

Let's read stanza one in yellow together.

This time men read the bold, women read the regular print. Ready?

**'Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**'Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.**

'Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
'Blessed are those who hunger and
thirst for
righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Stanza one are those who are suffering.

1. Blessed are the poor: the dispossessed, abandoned people of Israel and the world (Isaiah 11:4; 29:19; 32:7; 61:1; Amos 2:7; 8:4; Zephaniah 2:3). Poor in spirit signifies that they are despondent. They are not just poor; they have lost hope. Powell: One might translate this, "Blessed are the hopeless poor."

2. The mourners in verse four are the miserable and unhappy people because of the losses they have experienced. They have no cause for joy.

3. The meek could be humble, non-violent, gentle or kind. Some versions translate this "homeless." Praeis is the word the Septuagint uses to translate "anawim," who are the homeless poor (Psalm 36:11). They are the humiliated and powerless of this world. They have been denied basic human needs.

4. Those who hunger and thirst for dikaiosyne (righteousness or justice), are those who seek vindication. They have been denied justice.

So, if we put together this dizzying array of adjectives, in the first four verses Jesus says, "Blessed are the dispossessed, abandoned, poor, homeless - those who have lost so much, mourning, who have no reason for joy -the meek, gentle, humble, kind, non-violent, humiliated, powerless, who have been denied basic human needs, and human

rights, who long for God's righteousness, justice and vindication. Heaven and earth belong to them. They will be satisfied and comforted in the eschaton.

It would be a shame to not sing this passage, on Sunday, one of the most poetic, yearning and soulful in Scripture.

There is not virtue, Powell says, in being hungry or denied justice. These are not "entrance requirements" for getting into heaven. Jesus is not idealizing poverty. Indeed, he later encourages his disciples to fight it. Also, Jesus is not necessarily describing those who are listening to his sermon on the mount. This portion is in the third person.

In Matthew the Kingdom of Heaven (not the Kingdom of God) comes to us, not vice-versa. This is the Good News both Jesus and John preach: the Kingdom of Heaven has come near you. When God reigns, the poor get a better deal.

In verses 7-10 this shifts. If the first four beatitudes are those who are suffering, the second four are those who help them. **Let's read this section together. This time you read the bold face, and I'll read the regular print. Starting with verse 7. Ready?**

'Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

**'Blessed are those who are persecuted
for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the
kingdom of heaven.**

5. Blessed are the merciful. Jesus says mercy

is one of the weightier matters of the law (Matthew 23:23). It is more important than sacrifice (9:13, 12:7). Jesus carries this forward in 7:1, "Do not judge..."

Jesus' critique of the religious leaders is that they are too quick to judge and too slow to show mercy (18:23-34). God does not like religion that keeps people from eating with outcasts.

Note that all these meanings of mercy represent actions that are not carried out in the religious community, but rather out in the world. The reward? They will receive mercy. All boats rise with the tide.

6. Blessed are the pure in heart. The heart is the source of outward speech (12:34, 15:18) and behavior (15:18) and introspection (9:4, 24:48). People lust and love in their hearts. Remember Jesus says if you look at someone with lust you commit adultery in your heart. Your heart is your innermost being. In Matthew, to forgive from the heart is to forgive truly. To understand from the heart is to understand fully.

Katharos doesn't just mean pure. It can also mean clean. A clean dish is one that is not contaminated. People can worship with their lips, while their hearts are far from God (15). Perhaps a pure or clean heart is one that is turned to God, and God's wishes. Perhaps it means words and thoughts are congruent. That's the definition of **integrity**. The pure in heart will "see God." Since even Moses didn't get to see God, this reward is probably eschatological.

7. Peacemakers: Are the blessed peacemakers making peace within those in the Christian community or out in the world? Some have ventured the former. In Matthew

5:23-24 Jesus says to leave your gift at the altar and make peace with your brother or sister. Is this just within the community of faith? The injunction to love your enemies seems to suggest a larger context.

Eirenopoioi (peacemaker) is not used anywhere else in the New Testament, but in other literature it refers to rulers who establish security and socioeconomic well-being for the people. **Eirene** is the word the Septuagint uses for Shalom (the Hebrew word for peace). The Semitic community of Matthew would certainly lean towards shalom's broader: wholeness and well-being. Peacemakers are those who work for the well-being and wholeness of all people (Kingbury, "Matthew as Story"). They shall be called Children of God. You are a child of God when you act like God (5:48).

8. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Those who hunger and thirst for **dikaioisyne** (righteousness or justice) were blessed earlier. Dikaioisyne is also used in 6:33, when Jesus teaches people to seek first God's kingdom and God's dikaioisyne, rather than worrying about food, clothing and the like. The sense is to seek what is right in God's eyes. This, of course, runs the risk of being interpreted individualistically in Puritan America. What does God want? For us to not drink, dance or play cards? Or does God want justice for the orphan, widow and alien, the hungry, the homeless? The call seems to be: seek the well-being of others, and God will take care of you. Blessed are those who hunger for this well-being of others, this justice for all.

Can you feel the Beatitudes coming to a climax? In this passage, blessing comes to those who are persecuted for dikaioisyne.

Participation in peace-making and justice-making brings with it persecution. Those who suffer persecution are commended as oppose to those who fall away (13:20-21). This beatitude ends the second verse of four, completing the thought. The first and last beatitudes end with the same words (apodosis): "The kingdom of heaven belongs to them." Them.

So, the first four blessings go to those who suffer. The second four blessings go to those who help the suffering, and are even willing to take a few blows to do so. They are blessed for voluntary identification with the suffering of this world. Perhaps this is the most Christian action one can undertake: Voluntary identification with the suffering. And then the ninth beatitude, socks us in the eyes. It shifts from the third person to the second person. "Blessed are YOU." Oh, I thought we were talking about someone else. A good sermon brings it home to roost. It gets personal now. Now we're meddlin' Let's read verses 11-12 together, in unison:

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This is pure theology of the cross. Heidelberg Disputation. A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. **This world is suffering.** Open your eyes. Look around. A lot of people are suffering. God cares about suffering. And if we're the people of God, the body of Christ, guess what?

It should come as no surprise that the first lesson is Micah 6:8. "He has shown you O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require, but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. Justice and mercy factor considerably in the Sermon on the Mount.

And it should come as no surprise that we have a theology of the cross in the second reading again this Sunday. Jews seek signs, and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified... foolishness to the world, but to those of us who are called, the power and wisdom of God... For God chose what is foolish... weak... low and despised in the world to shame the wise and reduce to nothing the powers that be...

...

Well, Jesus, it's a pretty good sermon so far. Could use a few more illustrations. Needs more grace, less law, but not bad for a first sermon, fresh out of the waters of his baptism. We'll give it a B+.

After the beatitudes I would have just sat down, but Jesus goes on. You are salt. You are light. This is what baptism delivers. Jesus names the new creation. He describes it using vivid images. And then Jesus goes into the law. You have heard it said... But I say to you... Sometimes he intensifies the law. Other times he negates it. You have heard it said love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Jesus invites us to do impossible things!

Then Jesus gives us food for the journey. He goes on to talk about what we will need to do these impossible things:

- He talks about the practice of prayer. When you pray... Ask for what you need...
- Then he talks about the practice of generosity. When you give alms... Don't store up treasures.
- The practice of self-denial. When you fast...
- The practice of forgiveness.

The practices etch what the soul ominous bodies. And then he spends considerable time talking about anxiety. Isn't that interesting? Don't worry about your life. Don't worry about having enough. Stuff... On fact, share liberally. (This is what Christianity IS.) Consider the lilies of the field... the birds of the air.

How do we preach this stuff? I think we cast an

enticing vision of the new world, and offer an imaginative glimpse of how people might live into it here, and now.

Ralph Klein pointed out it takes 18 minutes to read the Sermon on the Mount aloud. That would be a short sermon for a bishop. I got to thinking, why not have the congregation read the Sermon on the Mount together for the sermon one week in February? Take the day that you would have spent preparing a sermon, go to a quiet, soulful place and spend the day reading and praying.

For your reading, consider Luther's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, based on a sermon series he preached.

(<http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/37luther0.htm>) The translator's introduction reads as follows: "During Bugenhagen's absence Luther preached a long while for him, regularly, on the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters of Matthew, beginning Nov. 9, 1530. These sermons were then published, first in 1532, at Wittenberg, under Joseph Klug, in quarto; in 1533 at Marburg, in octavo; and in 1539, again in Wittenberg, in quarto, under Johann Weiss. In 1533 they were also translated into Latin by Vincent Ohsopoeus." So, sermon series are no new idea. Luther himself did them regularly. Consider announcing this Sunday a five-week series on the Sermon on the Mount, the Be-happy Attitudes, Jesus' First Sermon, or whatever will capture the hearts and minds of the people in your community.

Whatever you do, I invite you to preach and live a vision for God's kingdom, not paternalistic dogoodery, as Marty Storts says, but like Jesus in the Beatitudes, let's preach about hurting people that God loves, and about caring people that God sends. Amen.

Be at peace with God and with one another,

Michael Rinehart, Bishop

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