

Epiphany 5A. Matthew 5:1-20; Isaiah 58:1-9. February 9, 2020.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus is telling us the truth. He is not reading us the news. The news then was all bad. The brutal Roman Empire held the people of Israel, along with all of the Mediterranean, in its grip, pulling all of the resources out of the land and people to support endless war. The local government was a puppet king, in league with the Romans and supported by a collaborationist religious elite. The rich paid manageable bribes to maintain their luxury, while the poor squeezed out the taxes that kept Rome from murdering them. Empire always breeds corruption, and when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, vice and power were inseparable. Just recently, the government had executed Jesus' cousin and colleague, John the Baptist, for speaking the truth too plainly to a lascivious, cowardly bureaucrat.

All the news was bad news. And, Jesus tells the truth: blessed are the poor in heart, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the meek and those who mourn. Blessed are the peacemakers and those who are persecuted and reviled for Jesus and the kingdom. As a corrupt, cruel, faithless political system grinds its heel, Jesus talks of blessings. He'll get to denunciations of the powerful and cruel, and they're already implied in the Beatitudes, but he starts with blessings. And (and this is tricky for us roll-up-your-sleeves, can-do Americans) these blessings are indicative, not imperative. They are statements of truth, not exhortations to repentance.

This might actually be a little harder for us. The Beatitudes do not invite us to a program of moral striving, which we might be really good at. They invite us instead to adventurous moral imagination. They invite us to imagine a truth that is deeper than the news. And we have to imagine it both because things are not going well and because these truths are always counter-cultural. The culture of the dominant will always offer to mourners only pity, to the persecuted only blame, to the meek only disdain. It takes work to believe that God is with the weary and downtrodden, the peacemakers and the pure-hearted, because we are always captivated by the heresy that blessedness and success are the same.

But they are not. The deep truth of the world is the economy of God's love and salvation, which pours out blessings among the despised of the world. The deepest truth of the world is the irrepressible goodness of God, which does not always show up in headlines, but is always at work among us and among those who are always left out of our headlines. God's determination to bless cannot be impeded by the news.

We are not strangers to the news of Jesus' world. Our news is also bad news. With a mad lib-style substitution process, we could describe the news today the same way I described Roman-occupied Israel. We who read this news are tired, angry, discouraged, and afraid. *And*, we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And when Jesus calls us salt and light, there is an imperative: to be what we are, regardless of how deep the night is in which we shine. Or, I guess, regardless of how bland the food we're seasoning.

You are salt, so be salty. You are light, so shine. Isaiah helps us understand what on earth that means: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? *Then* your light shall break forth like the dawn.”

To be the light Jesus tells us we are, we just have to do these impossible things. But in a weird way, the bible here is pretty realistic. It’s obvious that what the world needs is a miracle—only the impossible will do, and it is to the impossible that we are called. I’ll say two things about this incredible list that makes us what Jesus thinks we are. First, we do them where we are. For some of us, that may be at a large political level that affects millions of lives. It may be the kind of thing that truly feels like loosing the bonds of injustice and letting the oppressed go free. For many of us, it will be here, in our village, our neighborhood or block or commute or family. And then it may be more like sharing our bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless into our homes, or clothing the naked.

And second, well, this point is a little weird, but stick with me. We gain the stamina to do this impossible work, in the face of resistance and disappointment, because we believe that the Beatitudes are already true. We live from, not towards, the Beatitudes. God's blessing is our starting point and grounding. Surrounded by bad news, Jesus starts with blessing. We start blessed, we start with and from blessedness. And when we start from blessedness, we find ourselves fighting for what we love, instead of what we are against. This is how we remain Christians, true to what we love, regardless of how cruel our enemies are.

The news is bad. And you are blessed, you are a blessing, you are called to bless the hurting world. Amen.