

A Map and a Hammer

Matthew 5:1-12; 1 John 3:1-3

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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November 5, 2023/Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

This weekend, a few of us from LMC attended a conference in Calgary put on by MCC Alberta. The theme was finding harmony in polarized times.

One of the things that stuck out to me during a Friday session was that in a context where everything seems to be shifting — politically, institutionally, and beyond — the task of the church is to be re-framers and storytellers.

Well, I like stories. Jesus seemed to as well, which I find encouraging.

And I like framing familiar things in different ways. We've done a bit of the latter already this morning in our "scripture reading."

In that light, I want to anchor my sermon this morning around two simple stories, two images. You can probably already guess what these are from the title of my sermon.

For my first story and image, I want to travel down the road a kilometer or so to the jail. Yes, another story from the jail. I'll keep telling these until someone tells me they're sick of them.

(Actually, even then I probably won't stop. 😊)

As I may have mentioned before, I'm watching the TV series called The Chosen with the guys on the remand unit.

The guys love this show. Sometimes they're turning their plastic chairs around to face the screen before I even have a chance to say hello or ask them how they're doing. They know they're on the clock and if we don't start immediately, we might not get to finish a whole episode uninterrupted.

Well, on Monday I got to the end of season two with one of the units. And in the last episode of season two, Jesus is preparing to preach the Sermon on the Mount.

He's talking with Matthew, who is writing everything Jesus says and does down. They're discussing the shape Jesus' sermon should take, what he should open with for maximum impact.

Jesus' plan is to start with the salt and light part (which immediately follows the Beatitudes in our bibles). Matthew suggests he start with something else.

They go back and forth for a while, and Jesus ends up agreeing. And so, he spends a lot of this episode pondering what he should put in its place, what should his big sermon begin with.

Near the end, he tells Matthew he has an idea about how he wants to start. "Tell me," Matthew says.

Jesus looks at him, and says, "I want to give people a map, directions, where they should look to find me."

And then he speaks the words that we know so well:

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.

It's quite a moving scene. One of many in this series.

Around the circle afterward, I asked the guys what they thought. What stood out to you?

One guy — it was the first time I had seen him, although a later search of his file made it clear that it was by no means his first time in prison — excitedly said, I love that image Jesus used of a map. Many guys around the circle nodded.

“Say more,” I said. “Well, we’re all looking for a better life, a better path, and, well, I don’t know, maybe Jesus is saying that the way to him is different than we sometimes think.”

What followed was a fascinating discussion about encountering Jesus “at the bottom,” not among the learned and the pious and the powerful, but among the poor, the broken, the ones who mourn, those who hunger for a righteousness they can never quite attain.

Now, I know there is a lot from this scene that isn’t in the bible. Jesus never actually says, “I want to give people a map, directions, where they should look to find me.” We have no evidence that Matthew played any kind of consultative role in the Sermon on the Mount. There is obviously some creative license taken here.

But boy, we sure had a Jesus-y conversation based on that scene and that quote. That image of the Beatitudes as a map of where to find Jesus sure landed well in the jail. And it has stuck with me throughout the week.

Second story, second image.

A few years ago, I got into my office on a Tuesday morning saw a message on the church phone.

It was from an older woman who had recently visited our church as a guest scripture reader. I had met her before the service. She was polite, kind, articulate, elegant. Her reading was precise, polished, clear.

She sat, attentively and with perfect posture during the service, and left the church not long after it was over. I didn’t think much about her after that. I was glad that she had come and grateful for her contribution, but I didn’t expect to hear from her again.

But now, this message. She told me that she had wanted to tell me this after the service, but there wasn’t time, that she had appreciated my words, that she was challenged and convicted, that she was glad she had come.

I listened in somewhat bewildered gratitude. I hadn't felt great about the sermon, to be honest. It was about the beatitudes in and the "foolishness of the cross" in 1 Corinthians 1. Two marvelous texts, but I didn't feel like my words had done justice to the subject matter.

This woman evidently felt differently. She concluded her very kind message with these words: "So thank you, again, for your words. They really hammered my heart... in a good way."

I sat there for a few minutes and pondered those words. *They really hammered my heart*. It struck me as just about the best compliment I had received in some time.

I could think of few better things for words — mine or anyone else's — to accomplish. And it got me thinking about hearts.

In an age where we are constantly enjoined to "trust our hearts" or "follow our hearts" or "be true to our hearts," this woman's expression reminded me of the simple truth that our hearts need an occasional hammering.

They need to be pounded into shape. They need to be broken and remade. They need to be changed and judged and refined and trained and turned toward higher ends than ourselves.

Our hearts are not infallible maps in our pursuit of truth and beauty and meaning and identity and authenticity. Our hearts can be small and selfish things.

They can lead us astray. Sometimes badly. Sometimes they need to be hammered with words like, "blessed are the poor in spirit... the meek... the merciful... the pure... the peacemakers..." in order to function as they ought to.

The Beatitudes can function as a divine hammer. A tool that God can use to make our hearts what they ought to be.

So, a map and a hammer.

I like these two metaphors. I think they point to something good and true about how these opening lines of Jesus' most famous sermon are to operate in our lives.

They orient us, and reorient us, and sometimes dislocate and frustrate us. They should us where to go to find Jesus in the world.

And they pound our hearts into Jesus-shape. They tenderize them. They remind us that our hearts should be where Jesus' heart is in the world.

I want to focus on two specific Beatitudes, if only because of the conference that I just attended and the realities of polarization and conflict and navigating difference that we were navigating all weekend.

I recently noticed something about this passage that I had never really seen before.

It comes in Matthew 5:6-7 and what we might call the "order of operations."

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness/justice" followed immediately by "Blessed are the merciful." Back-to-back. Almost as if they need to go together.

(The Greek word often translated "righteousness" in Mat. 5:6 is the same word as that for "justice." Some English translations even translate this verse, "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice.")

It's probably no mystery why this connection stood out. Ours is a cultural moment where many people at least *claim* to be hungering and thirsting after righteousness/justice.

One can hardly open a newspaper or go online without encountering righteous pleas for justice of all kinds. Racial justice, climate justice, socioeconomic justice, justice for the unborn, justice in healthcare, justice for the incarcerated, justice for victims, electoral justice, justice for consumers...

Plenty of people out there are hungering and thirsting after justice.

Mercy, it seems to me, is less obvious. Less prevalent. It's not nearly as exciting to be merciful (online or in real life) as it is to be hungering and thirsting after righteousness/justice.

It doesn't get the juices flowing in the same way. It fares poorly in the outrage cycles that prop up the media industry and big tech more generally.

Mercy is boring compared to changing the world or being outraged that it isn't changing fast enough or in the right ways.

And yet Jesus apparently puts these two beatitudes back-to-back. Why?

Well, I think it's because Jesus knows the human heart very well. He knows how easily our hungering and thirsting for righteousness/justice can become mostly about us.

He knows that we don't see nearly as clearly as we think we do—that we are often most in danger of being catastrophically wrong when we are most convinced that we are right.

He knows that very few people march off to war (literal or metaphorical) who *aren't* convinced that they are hungering and thirsting after righteousness/justice.

He knows that dark impulses reside in every human heart. He knows how often violence is done in the name of righteousness/justice. He knows it better than most. It put him on a cross.

(Forgive them, they don't know what they are doing...)

And so, he sticks these two "blesseds" together, both to honour and to chasten our pursuits.

Your hunger for the world to be just and right is admirable, and God bless you as you pursue this vision, Jesus says. But don't you dare forget mercy, for you do not see as clearly as you think you do, and you do not act as consistently as you imagine.

It's also interesting to note the promise that goes along with these back-to-back blessings in the Beatitudes.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness/justice... **for they will be filled.**

Blessed are the merciful... **for they will receive mercy.**

Those who pursue the kingdom of heaven in the manner of Christ will ultimately be satisfied.

They will no longer be driven by all that is lacking. And they will be forgiven and healed for all the ways in which their hunger and their thirst was selfish and misdirected.

We need both. Whether we are on the left or the right, whether we would describe ourselves as progressive or conservative, or somewhere in between.

We need this map to find our way to Jesus. And we need our hearts to be hammered into the shape of mercy.

With the Beatitudes, we must remember that this is not just good advice but good news — a new possibility for the world being inaugurated in and through Jesus.

These are not just words; Jesus not only preached the Sermon on the Mount, he lived it.

He *was* poor in spirit, he mourned, he *was* meek, he *did* hunger and thirst after righteousness, he *was* merciful and pure in heart; he *did* make peace — between God and human beings and between people; he *was* persecuted because of righteousness, he *was* insulted and had evil spoken of him falsely.

Ultimately, he was killed.

There are many reasons Jesus ended up on a Roman cross, from the crudely political and religious and profoundly human, to the divine (we believe that this was the will of God).

But whatever else we might say by way of explanation, we must surely start by observing that Jesus died the way he did because he lived the way he did.

I want to end with a few lines from the song we listened to earlier from Jon Guerra.

Blessed are the poor who have nothing to own
Blessed are the mourners who are crying alone
Blessed are the guilty who have nowhere to go

For their hearts have a road to the kingdom of God
And their souls are the songs of the kingdom of God
And they will find a refuge, for theirs is the kingdom of God

Those who follow this map to the heart of God, those who allow their hearts to be pounded into shape by Jesus' teaching and example have a road to the kingdom of God.

Their souls are the songs of the kingdom of God.

And they will indeed find a refuge. Theirs is the kingdom of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

