

Sermon: **Echo, Echo, Echo**

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

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Context: WWPCC

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*Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:  
“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Matthew 5:1,2

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It always starts the same way. With the crowds. When Jesus saw the crowds, Matthew says, he went up the mountain.

It always starts with the crowds, with the people. I wonder what Jesus saw in them on this particular day. What did he see in their faces and in their eyes?

It's early on in the proceedings. Maybe they're not hungry yet, at least not for ordinary food, as they will be some months later, when they follow him out into the desert and forget to bring their picnic baskets.

Maybe they're not yet burning with political hopes, fueled by dreams of liberation, the way they are when, some years later, he rides into Jerusalem on that bizarre little donkey, confounding them yet again.

What does he see in them at this point? What does he see in their faces and in their eyes that inspires these words?

Curiosity, surely. Sadness. Hope. Anger. Fear. Love. The same things I imagine he might see on our faces and in our eyes, were he to look out at this crowd here today.

We can't say what he saw for certain, of course. The text doesn't say. But what we do know is that whatever it was he saw, he then sat down and gave the crowd there that day these words, the Beatitudes.

They are the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, the first words in the longest unbroken passage of Jesus' teaching in the entire Bible.

Out of all of the material that follows—teachings about prayer and tithing and marriage and forgiveness—these poetic musings, these eight distinct blessings, have emerged as some of the most famous words Jesus ever said. (Luke adds four more, along with a host of woes, but Matthew gives us only these eight.)

They are enough. These same eight blessing continue to echo down through the centuries, finding expression in art and music, in the daily practice of entire monastic

orders, and most commonly in our time, in framed needlepoint pictures, adorning walls in kitchens and bathrooms and sitting rooms all across the country.

The Beatitudes, or portions of them, have been quoted or recorded by everyone from Shakespeare to Sting. They have appeared in books and performances ranging from *Doctor Zhivago*, to *Godspell* to (and this was a genuine surprise) *The Little Shop of Horrors*.

Why is that? Well, surely it's because there is something about these words that plucks the strings of our souls, that rings a bell resident deep down inside all of us, the part of us that longs to live a blessed life and wonders how to do that.

So these words have echoed through the ages and they will echo through our service today in shared liturgy, in spoken word and in song.

We will repeat them several times in the hope that their meaning might come into better focus for us. For the truth is that even as they inspire us, these famous words also confound us. They confuse and challenge us perhaps us as often as they comfort us.

Perhaps most of the time they simply leave us scratching our heads, pondering in what sense, in what world, they could possibly be true.

How is it exactly that the meek shall inherit the earth? Seems much more likely that the meek will get flattened by the steamroller of history.

Blessed are the poor in spirit? Really? I just don't see it.

If these words, these maxims, confound, confuse and challenge us, maybe that has more to do with us than with the Beatitudes themselves.

If the stories that Jesus tells and the teachings he offers always start with the crowds, then it bears mentioning that in our time the crowd hearing these words literally stretches around the world.

This is the given lectionary text for this Sunday. And so these very same words are being read in Presbyterian churches, and Lutheran churches and Catholic churches and Episcopal churches all around the world.

They're being read in English and Spanish and Portuguese and Swahili and Mandarin and Korean and Amheric.

They're being heard in New York City and in little villages in the Philippines. Churchgoers will hear them today in ornate cathedrals in capital cities like La Paz and Tehran and in cinderblock sanctuaries in the countryside far away from the halls of wealth and power, where people are lucky to get one meal a day, never mind three.

I make this point at some length because, as many observers have noted, the power of these words depends not just on how you hear them. But on where you hear them.

If the Beatitudes sometimes make very little sense to us maybe that's by design. Maybe they're not meant to. Maybe they're not really intended for us. And least not for those of us who are at the top of life's pyramid, who are gainfully employed or happily retired. Those of us who have health care insurance and 401k's and two cars and a time share condo on the beach.

Those of us who have somewhere to go when the floodwaters come. Those of us who have the means and the right and the opportunity to try to change our political situation if we don't like the party in power.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Maybe these words don't make sense to us because they're not meant for us.

But imagine how these same words might be heard in Egypt today. Maybe that's how the folks feel who have taken to the streets – poor in spirit. And maybe that's all they've ever felt, and maybe they're tired of it.

Is there a better way to usher in the kingdom of heaven than forcing it to come to you by way of rioting in the streets? Of course there is.

Jesus has some ideas about that, too. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Because maybe in his vision for a world in which these blessings are real and true, you can't have one without the other. There is no kingdom, no realm of God, where there is no peace.

For all of us listeners, these words depend not just on how you hear them, but where you hear them. Today they're being heard by a crowd stretching around the world.

Yesterday, though, I was part of a much smaller crowd and I was reminded that these words can in fact be for us, too. That they have to be for us, too.

I was sitting in the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church of Morganton. Sitting right next to our voting elder, Julia Richards. Susan Laney was also present, sitting a few rows back with the other visitors and non-voting elders. The good Rev. Gene Witherspoon, also there.

All of us present yesterday knew what was coming. That we would be voting to remove Amendment B from our constitution – an amendment that is centered on human sexuality, and one that has divided our church from the moment it was included in our constitution.

We would be voting to replace Amendment B with language centered instead on the lordship of Jesus Christ, making faithful discipleship, not sexual practice, the main consideration for ordained leadership.

You'd think this would be cause for great rejoicing, replacing divisive polity with good, Reformed theology of a kind we can all agree on.

But many faithful Presbyterians worry that removing Amendment B will open the door to the ordination of gays and lesbians. Most of us see this as opening the door to a church that is as just and as generous as God's grace. But for them, this would be the end of the church as they understand it. (Oh for a world, and a church, where "us" and "them" disappear from our lexicons.)

And so as I sat there yesterday, listening to the debate, knowing that this was the text for today, I wondered what Jesus might see if he looked out at that crowd. Curiosity, maybe. Sadness, probably. Apprehension, certainly. Hope, yes. Anger. Fear. Love. Yes, all of those things.

Before I tell you how the vote turned out. I would like to say just a bit more about this "issue." First of all, if you happen to be gay or lesbian, it's not an "issue." It's personal. This vote was about you. Or perhaps it was about your children. Or your parents. For all of you, it's personal and it's about justice.

And for those reasons it's important. It's important that we keep having this debate and keep taking this vote because it's not about an issue, it's about people. Jesus always broke down the barriers that denied people their full humanity, and kept certain people in their place. And we must work to do the same.

But for many of us, we want to get Amendment B out of our constitution so that we can get on with the work of being church in a world that is in crisis. Where people are literally dying because they're hungry; where they are figuratively dying because they are starved for love. Where they're cold for want of shelter, sick for want of proper medical care. Where they're in danger for want of peace.

The debate on the church's role all of these issues, should properly dwarf the debate on who can serve as an elder or deacon or minister in the church. And it's time we left this one relatively small debate behind and moved on to these other, much larger ones.

Which is why I felt some sadness yesterday. As this debate unfolded speaker after speaker rose to argue against the amendment. Their tone and their numbers were such that I began to feel pretty certain the motion would be defeated and we'd be back to square one.

And I felt not just sadness but grief. Grief for my gay and lesbian friends who are called to ministry and leadership, and grief for our church that we can't get past this "issue" on which we burn so much time and energy.

I consoled myself with these very words: *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.* But before I could decide if they applied to me, or how they might be true, the vote was announced: 145 in favor; 99 opposed.

"My" side had won. But I did not clap. No one clapped I'm glad to say. Instead we rose to sing the doxology, giving thanks to a God who loves us, every single one of us, not because of but sometimes despite our position on this or any other matter.

And I thought about all those people who think that this will mean the end of the church as they know it. These faithful Presbyterian folk. These good colleagues and neighbors and, yes, good friends.

We differ but make no mistake they mean well. And now they are fearful and probably hurting and feeling grief for themselves and this church they love so much.

And maybe this person is you.

“Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.”

The Beatitudes are not for winners or for the losers. They’re not for rich Americans or poor Bolivians. They’re not for progressive Christians or for our more conservative counterparts.

They are for all of us. Which is why they will always echo down through the ages, down through our worship, down through our hearts.

Blessed are you . . .

Amen

**Here also is the benediction I used (not original to me) following the service:**

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths and superficial relationships so that you will live deeply and from the heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and the exploitation of people, so that you will work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those that mourn, so that you will reach out your hand to them and turn their mourning into joy.

May God bless you with just enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you will do those things that others say cannot be done.