

GIVING GOD YOUR WORST

September 1, 2013

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

This morning we are beginning a new sermon series called *The Trip of a Lifetime*. We are basing the series on the Beatitudes of Jesus that we find at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 through 7 of the Gospel of Matthew. The Sermon on the Mount is a collection of Jesus' teachings that Matthew the Gospel writer compiles and puts together at the beginning of his Gospel. They serve as the centerpiece of Jesus' moral and ethical teaching. We are going to look at the Beatitudes of Jesus – these several blessings that begin the Sermon on the Mount with an eye toward wondering what is Jesus trying to tell us through these several blessings about the deeper meaning of life. How are we to see ourselves in the grand scheme of things? What is the purpose of our days? What are we called to do? How are we to find true blessing in life?

It's interesting in the Christian world when people talk about the blessing of God how seldom do we refer to this great list of blessings that Jesus indicates are the true blessings. You hear a lot of people talk about how blessed they are – and they speak of things like – good health, good income, good kids, good stocks and bonds, good house – but seldom do you hear people talk about blessings in reference to the blessings of Jesus. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are you when people revile you. So in this series we are going to turn away from these material blessings – which probably have little to do with God – to these deeper blessings that Jesus would suggest lead us to the real meaning and purpose of life. This morning we are going to look at the first beatitude in Matthew 5 verse 3 – Blessed

are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven – and we will look at this beatitude through a story in Luke’s Gospel found in chapter 18: 9-14.

Perhaps one of the most heartbreaking stories told in all the Bible, perhaps even in all of literature, is an episode in the life of Israel’s King David. King David is the most beloved of all kings – a man, as the Bible tells us, after God’s own heart. From his earliest days of taking on the giant Goliath – David seems to do all the right things. He is faithful, he is true, he is just. He is loved by the people. He has the world in his hands; he has the tiger by the tail. He has just about everything. But David, in a very human moment, becomes obsessed over the beauty of a young woman – another man’s wife – and he acts on his obsession, uses his monarchial power, and performs an act of egregious infidelity. As a result, David learns that Bathsheba, the beautiful young woman, is with child, David’s child. And what unfolds from there is a cover-up story that would make the Watergate conspirators blush – resulting in the murder of Bathsheba’s warrior husband. David, in a very short period of time - loses his senses - loses his soul - but he doesn’t yet know it. He has no grasp of what he has so quickly become.

Enter his confidant and counselor Nathan who tells him a parable about a poor man who has a little lamb that he treasures - that he has raised since it was born - and a rich man who insists on the poor man’s lamb to feed his friends. The story enrages David – that a rich man, with hundreds of sheep in his own flock, could be so callous as to demand the poor man’s one and only sheep to feed his friends. David is enraged and David demands justice to fall heavy upon the rich man. And just as David has said this – there is this tragic pause when everyone can see that the callous, evil, rich, selfish, sheep-stealing man is really David. Everyone can see it ... except for one person – and that’s David. Tragedy at its height. And then Nathan lowers the boom and says to the puffed up King – “You are the man.”

One cannot read this story of David without nearly losing one’s breath. And the reason you nearly lose your breath is that, as you are reading about how blind David is to himself and to what he has done, you think if this story can be about someone like David, the beloved and faithful king, then

the story can and is really about us. We are the man. We are the woman. We have failed to see ourselves for who we are.

The great stories of literature are full of such characters – Shakespeare had his King Lear – whose insecurity pushed away all those who were truly faithful to him. Macbeth, whose lust for power turned him insanely paranoid. Melville had his Captain Ahab – whose lustful, vengeful pursuit of the great white whale was his very undoing. Miller has his Willy Lowman in *A Death of a Salesman*, whose dreams of himself turn delusional and lead him to an early grave – where his son stands and says, “He never knew who he was.”

He never knew who he was.

It’s what Nathan is trying to say to the King – you don’t know who you are! And so in Psalm 51 – a Psalm attributed to David as his response to Nathan’s “You are the man” - David says, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy steadfast love, according to thy abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.” And later, “For a sacrifice acceptable to thee, O God, is a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart, thou wilt not despise.”

And now you realize that David has finally beginning to figure out who he truly is.

It explains Jesus’ parable – about the Pharisee and the tax collector saying their prayers in the temple. And the Pharisee using it as an occasion to remind God of how good he is. How in the moral pantheon he stands above most. How lucky God is that he is on God’s side. He is like most of us religious people who have a pretty clear view of everyone else’s sins – and a very poor view of our own. He rejoices in not being like the tax collector – he is focused on someone else’s eye speck – and he can’t see the log in his own eye. You hear it, don’t you, in your own conversation? You hear yourself speaking with clarity and disgust about the immorality of others – not noticing the deafening silence you have about your own. You sense yourself getting enraged as you read the paper over all those people out there doing the wrong things. You demand justice. You wonder if the world, because of them, is going to hell in a hand basket. And you would never stop to think that maybe

the world is going to hell because of you? It's because we don't know ourselves. We just don't know ourselves.

So the lowly tax collector takes his seat alongside great King David and says, "Have mercy upon me, O Lord ... because I finally figured out who I am. I'm a sinner." And Jesus says – now that's the guy who gets it. That's the guy first in line for the kingdom of heaven – because that's the guy who sees how much he needs. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who understand their depravity. Blessed are those who know they have this big blind spot. Blessed are those who realize that they have enough work to do on their own, they can't be worrying about anyone else. Blessed are those who get how much mercy they need, and blessed are those who see how much mercy they've been given.

I've been thinking about all this this week as you and I've watched and read about the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington. I remember talking a couple years ago to a college student about the Civil Rights Movement and the days of segregation. And I explained to this college student that it wasn't too long ago that African-Americans weren't allowed at lunch counters, and in theaters and in proper bathroom facilities and at the front of the bus. That black folks had dogs and fire hoses turned on them when they asked for some of these basic rights. And I remember the bafflement on her face. It wasn't something she could believe – that 50 years ago we couldn't see as a country how bad that was. How we could so easily allow ourselves to do such bad, bad things. We just couldn't see ourselves. We just didn't get it. 50 years hence, though, now she could see it so clearly.

And then she wondered out loud – "Boy," she said, "it makes me wonder what I'm not seeing now. If they could be so blind then, maybe I could be so blind now?"

Could that be possible? It's what we might ask when we approach the table with the broken bread and the poured cup. The broken body and shed blood. "Am I capable of this?" The table

where when Jesus announced that there was a betrayer in their midst – the disciples all asked, “Is it I, Lord?” As if to say – “I sure know it could be! I have the capacity.”

“Be merciful to me, O God, a sinner.” And to hear the Savior say, “Blessed are you. Blessed are you poor in spirit. Blessed are you with the broken heart. You got it. You know who you are. And you know what you need. And for you ... the kingdom of heaven.