

The Crowd, a sermon by Matt Logan,
director of young adult ministry and discipleship
Rejoice! Service at First Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, N.C.
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Today's Lectionary reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew, the fifth chapter, verses 1-12.
Listen for the word of God:

5 When Jesus[a] saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. **2** Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

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

11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely[b] on my account. **12** Rejoice 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 it, the beginning of the greatest sermon ever preached. Of course, not this sermon, the one that I am preaching. Rather, the Sermon on the Mount.

It begins with eight proverb-like proclamations lacking any narrative structure.

It's a bold move, but then again Jesus was a bold fully human and fully divine guy.

It's certainly a startling opening. The crowds that followed Jesus could have taken it one of two ways.

The first, "Who does this Jesus think he is announcing the inheritors of the Kingdom of God?"

Yet, it is written in chapter 7, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, that the crowds took it the second way. The crowds were astounded at his teaching, he taught with such authority and in a much different way than their scribes had been teaching them for years.

I think we would all agree that the second reaction is preferred, but I'm still not sure how to take it. I have always wondered if the crowd had missed the point.

This kind of reaction is strange when you think about the content of the sermon. It would be kind of like watching *Shawshank Redemption* in the theatre and being blown away by the set design and cinematography.

I mean, the reason they had gathered in the crowd in the first place is that they thought Jesus had something to say. They didn't need to be there. Their gathered presence already had granted Jesus authority.

It's also important to note what the author of Matthew doesn't report. It doesn't say that the crowd dropped everything and followed Jesus as a disciple. It doesn't announce any transformation. It doubles-down on the original position. This fella' is a really dynamic speaker. He delivers his hot takes with such esteem.

What it ultimately shows is that Jesus was getting famous. The Jesus movement had started, and anytime Jesus had a speaking engagement people were lining up to check it out.

It's no coincidence that Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount occurs almost right after Jesus is tempted with Fame by the Devil in the Wilderness. The only thing that comes between the Wilderness and the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus calling the disciples, and Jesus starting to garner fame. In Matthew 4.24 it is written, "So Jesus' fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains."

So everywhere that Jesus went, a crowd would gather.

The crowds had not been called by Jesus as the disciples had. The disciples followed Jesus at his command. The crowds followed Jesus because they were interested, intrigued, maybe even curious about what Jesus could do for their health or their businesses.

We shouldn't be too critical of the crowds, after all, it was only 12 that Jesus would call disciples. Yet, in both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke the authors try painstakingly to distinguish between the disciples and the crowds. The Beatitudes, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount tell us why.

This chasm between the crowds and the disciple's frames Jesus' sermon. In the Beatitudes, Jesus is addressing both the crowds and the disciples. Yet, they hear two different things. The Beatitudes are simultaneously encouragement and warning, an assurance but a cautionary tale.

He needed to know that those who followed him could be counted on when things got tough. He needed to know that when he was stripped of all his fame and influence if he would be enough. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus needed to ask the crowd the disciples had already answered. "Am I enough?"

Jesus wanted to shoot straight with the crowd. He wanted to make sure they knew what it meant to be blessed, simultaneously preparing the disciples for what was to come. He ends the beginning of the sermon by telling the disciples, "Rejoice and be glad, for, in the same way, they persecuted the prophets." He begins the end of the sermon by saying, "the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Jesus knew the kind of life the disciples would lead, and he wanted to prepare those in the crowd who were prepared to join them. He wanted and needed to tell both groups the truth. Both groups

followed Jesus, yet the disciples would be intimately exposed to the kingdom of heaven that had come near. Proclaiming the Kingdom and following Christ as a disciple would lead them into a world that wasn't willing to cede power to the new kingdom and they would need to be willing to risk everything.

What I'm trying to say is that the audience gathered included hearers and overhearers, the disciples and the crowds. To put it more concretely, there is a difference in being a fan of Jesus, thinking Jesus might have some interesting things to say, and being a disciple of Jesus, those who would risk everything to share in the work of the Kingdom. Jesus wanted the disciples and the crowds to know what the disciples had signed up for.

So, he begins to Preach--

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

Privation is the lot of the disciples in every sphere of their lives. They have no security, no possessions to call their own, not even a foot of earth to call their home, no earthly society to claim their absolute allegiance. For Christ's sake they have lost all. Jesus preaches knowing about the crowds too. Some of the representatives and preachers of the national religion, whose feet are firmly planted on the earth, who are deeply rooted in the culture and piety of the people and molded by the spirit of the age. Yet it is not they, but the disciples who are called blessed--theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

With each beatitude the gulf is widened between the disciples and the crowds. The crowds dream of progress, of power and of the future, but the disciples meditate on the end, the last judgement, and the coming of the kingdom. The disciples are strangers in the world, unwelcome guests and disturbers of the peace. They are bound to creation as they mourn for humanity. They are comforted by Christ. The one who mourns for even his torturers.

“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.”

The disciples are meek, they renounce every right of their own and live for the sake of Christ. When reproached, they hold their peace; when treated with violence they endure it patiently;

when people drive them from their presence, they yield their ground. They show by every word and gesture that they do not belong to this earth. Those who now possess the earth by violence and injustice shall lose it, and those who have utterly renounced it, who were meek to the point of the cross, shall inherit the new earth.

“Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.”

Those who follow Jesus grow hungry and thirsty on the way. They are longing for the forgiveness of all sin, for complete renewal, for the renewal too of the earth and the full establishment of God’s rule. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness find it in the bread of Christ’s flesh and the wine or juice of Christ’s blood. The sight of the fulfillment of their hunger and thirst is in Christ.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”

The disciple has an irresistible love for the down-trodden, the sick, the wretched, the wronged, the outcast and all who are troubled with anxiety. The merciful owe their lives entirely to Christ’s mercy. They cast their gaze on the distress and humiliation of others. They show their mercy not with self-comforting assertions, but by walking alongside those who cry Mercy!

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Emptying oneself of all selfish desire and impulse forces the disciple to rely solely on Jesus. When they look inward, they see only God. They do not seek to glorify themselves. By seeing God, they see Christ in others.

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”

The followers of Jesus have been called to peace. When he called them they found their peace. Jesus is their peace. Now they are told that they must not only have peace but make it. The disciples keep the peace by choosing to endure suffering themselves rather than inflict it on others. The peacemakers will carry the cross with their Lord, for it was on the cross that peace was made. Now that they are partners in Christ’s work, they are called the children of God as Christ is the Child of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for Righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Not recognition, but rejection, is the reward the disciple gets for following Christ. They are made righteous by the righteous one. It is for this reason that they renounce possessions, fortune, rights, righteousness, honor, and force for the sake of following Christ, will they be distinguished from the crowds.

Then we come to the last Beatitude, which is different in both form and content. The first eight beatitudes are left ambiguous. Jesus’ is offering himself to the crowds and to the disciples. They all start with “Blessed are the” or “Blessed are those.” Jesus is encouraging the disciples, announcing their blessings and inviting the crowds to follow him as a disciple and not just as a fan.

Then, I imagine Jesus leaned in extremely close. He had something to say just to the disciples. The last of the Beatitudes is intimate and closed off from the crowds. Instead of “blessed are the” or “blessed are those,” Jesus preaches:

“Blessed are YOU, when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward is in heaven.”

It begs the question, who would want to be a disciple?

Those who are poor in spirit and meek? Those who hunger and thirst and are persecuted?

Is anybody in the crowds going to sign up for that?

When our Interim Pastor Danny Massie delivers the Benediction and Charge every Sunday he reminds us to bear the name of Christ carefully. That charge is both an encouragement and a warning. He speaks to the hearers and the overhearers. He speaks to those who have made the decision and continue to make the decision daily to gather at the feet of Christ. He speaks to those who might be fans, but who are slowly pushing their way through the crowds. Who know that discipleship is about risk.

So, who would want to be a disciple?

Those for whom Jesus is enough. Amen.

Now hear this familiar benediction and charge:

Go into the world remembering that you are the people of God and you bear the name of Jesus Christ.

Bear that name carefully, for you are not your own.

Bear that name gratefully, for you have been redeemed at a price.

And bear that name joyfully for he enlists each of us in his service.

Now may the peace of Jesus Christ be upon you for this day and for all days. Amen.