

Sermon: Jesus' First Words  
Augsburg Chapel, Thursday February 6, 2014

We've been backing our way through the Sermon on the Mount this week: Monday, Paul Lutter unpacked Jesus' command: "be not anxious;" Tuesday, Phil Quanbeck tackled the command to "love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you." The first command is impossible; the second, downright insulting.

Perhaps it's worth remembering that the Sermon on the Mount starts, not with command, but with blessing. And in Matthew's gospel, the Sermon on the Mount begins Jesus' public ministry. He's recruiting his army of disciples, but the speech he gives is not "Be all that you can be." No, the first word out of his mouth is not command at all. The first word out of his mouth is "Blessed."

In a world that pays attention to "first words," three things stand out about Jesus'.

I. First: He calls people by blessing them. That's odd, because we're used to being called by command. As in "Go!" "Do!" "Be!" – or even "Follow." Let me build that out a little.

I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland in one of those brick row houses for which the city is justly famous. We shared walls with the Townsends on one side, the Cadigans on the other, and stray squirrels overhead.

My favorite moment was in this exuberantly overpopulated landscape was 6pm, when Mrs. Cadigan opened the back door, stepped onto the porch, and, with the voice of a drill sergeant, proceeded to yell: "Come and get it!" From all corners of the neighborhood, Cadigan kids would come tumbling, because, at the row house next door, there were six kids, and meals were first-come, first-serve, winner-take-all. Mrs. Cadigan rallied her troops by command: "Come and get it!"

We usually think call comes by command: the clear imperative to “get a job” or “major in accounting” or “be a writer” – but in the world according to God, call comes by blessing. We don’t snap to attention at words from the Drill Sergeant Within; instead, we’re invited to attend to our gifts -- and that’s very different.

II. The second thing to notice about Jesus’ first words: whom they address. This isn’t exactly the A team. And it doesn’t even look like the A Students or the Type A Types. This crowd would not make the Provost’s List or the Academy Awards or the Superbowl. They are certainly not going to Sochi! Look at them: poor in spirit, lost in grief, meek, persecuted.

That’s just the first round. The first four blessings fall on the losers. The second four fall on those who find them: the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who try to supply righteousness to the ones who hunger and thirst for it.

Scholars have said: this is really Jesus’ rebuttal to all those who divide the world into two kinds of people. The ancient world he walked into was full of factions: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, righteousness and unrighteousness.

Since then, we’ve only gotten better at two-kinds-of-people in the world dualism: liberal and conservative, Republicans and Democrats, have and have not, First and Two-Thirds world – or closer to home, liberal arts and professional studies, faculty and staff, Lutherans – and everyone else. Ah! the Academy is brilliant at this binary logic.

And Jesus is in effect signaling, there’s only one kind of division in the world according to God: those in need and those who help them. That’s the only thing that matters – and in the end, there’s really only one kind of people in the world. Because those who help those in need will be laughed at, made fun of, reviled and persecuted for attending to the Losers. So we’ll all be Losers– and we’ll all be Found.

Because, in the end: God blesses the whole mess.

III. That's powerful, because – and here's the third thing to notice: blessings are powerful. With each blessing, the world begins to turn. It's performative speech; these are words that work. When you make a promise or swear an oath or take one of those impossible vows to "love someone for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part," that promise already begins to deliver the goods. In fact, it's the first down payment on the final delivery. Blessings are like that too.

Look at what happens to Jesus' First Word: by the time he's laid all this blessing out, these folks are no longer Losers and Finders. They have a new name: "You are the Salt of the Earth..." (:13); "you are the Light of the World...." (:14)

Broken and blessed, these pieces of the human condition get remade into the two commodities most essential to life in the ancient world: Salt and Light. Salt kept food from spoiling. If you ate spoiled food in a world without Urgent Care and electrolytes, you would surely die. Light illumined a darkness that, without fluorescent light or cellphones, was profound when the sun went down.

But we get the best evidence from how well these inaugural blessings work by the Last Words in Jesus' public ministry: The Great Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46). In my bible, it's called The Great Surprise.

Because Jesus' last sermon just repeats his first one -- even Jesus had only one good sermon in him! (And he stole it from his mother: Matthew's beatitudes are Luke's Magnificat.) He tells the story of the Son of Man coming at the end of the ages and dividing the world into two kinds of people, sheep and goats. The Son of Man tells the sheep: "when I was hungry, you gave me food; thirsty, you gave me drink," etc.... And to the goats: "I was hungry, and you *didn't* give me anything to eat; thirsty, and you *didn't* give me anything to drink." And it's really his first sermon all over again – only look at what's changed. The one who *blessed* has become himself in need of blessing; the ones whom he blessed have become a *blessing to others*.

Blessings are like that: they leak. Like a drop of indigo dye in a vat of clear water, they infuse everything around them with blessing.

May all of us, who've been so richly blessed, scatter to be a blessing to others.

Amen.

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