

Astonishing News

Micah 6:1-8; I Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

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This morning we are hearing words from Jesus that have caused women and men to be thrown into prison, tortured, and executed. These words from Jesus have been considered some of the most revolutionary, most provocative, most upending words in history.

Indeed, Matthew tells us at the end of the Sermon, “When Jesus finished speaking all these words, the crowd who heard him was astonished.”

The word in Greek is even stronger: they were astounded, dumbstruck, flabbergasted, speechless; they didn't know what to say they were so shocked. They couldn't say anything they were so shocked. And if you keep reading Matthew you will discover that this will be only the first time this happens. Later, in the middle of Jesus' ministry, when he was preaching in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, the same thing happens. And toward the end of his ministry, while he was preaching to the crowds in Jerusalem, again it happens. Throughout Jesus' ministry, the crowds hear him, and they are astonished, astounded and they leave speechless.

Matthew says that the reason is because Jesus' didn't preach like the religious leaders of his day. What he said provoked a crisis, which is part of what it means when Matthew says that Jesus preached with authority. They came hungry for a word from the Lord, and when they heard a word, they knew it was truly a word from God but they also knew it turned their world upside down. It

messed up everything they assumed was good and right, all that was moral and in order. And they were so astonished that they were speechless.

This Sermon on the Mount begins with the famous Beatitudes, which is the focus of our Scripture Lesson this morning. We've heard the Beatitudes so many times that they have become domesticated and tamed to us. We no longer hear them as astonishing news; as a counter-cultural manifesto that provokes a crisis.

What a contrast to our world's ways of thinking these days. Our culture today might have very different beatitudes:

*Blessed are the strong in spirit, for they will make their heaven on earth.
Blessed are those who are unfeeling, for they shall be invulnerable.
Blessed are the aggressive, for they shall get what they want.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for power, for they shall dominate.
Blessed are the merciless, for they shall not see those who suffer.
Blessed are the duplicitous, for they shall fool everybody.
Blessed are the warriors, for they will be called the winners.
Blessed are you when you are popular and praised by all, for you will get ahead in this life and have great success.*

These are the kind of "blessings that we hear today. These are the promises of happiness that inundates us constantly. But the "blessings" Jesus offers us in Matthew today jars us by cutting against the grain of common sense. According to New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, Jesus' version should be called "The Anti-beatitudes" since they are so clearly contrary to our common understanding of what it means to be blessed.

The beatitudes are counter-cultural, subversive to the chapter and verse of the world in which we live. Through the centuries Christians wanting God to bless their success as the world defines it have had to reinterpret his words to make them fit like a bad suit. Some have said these blessings are meant only for life inside the

church, the way we behave with each other. Others maintain these are impossible ideals meant to show us the heaven that is coming, but unattainable now except for the rare saint, who is so different from the rest of us we can't even try to emulate them. Some have said that these words are simply descriptions of life in heaven but they are of no use in "the real world" where we live. These same people create a dualism between spirit and flesh, now and then, earth and heaven so that "spiritual" becomes a synonym for "unreal."

But what if Jesus really meant the words he said? What if he intended them to apply right here, right now to all those who would follow him? He would make for us as "subversives of the Spirit" in the real world, in spite that the world doesn't reward that sort of thing. In fact, it's dangerous, as the lives of many martyrs attest.

Did you know that the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount are central to the beginning of the baptist movement? Most Protestant groups in the sixteenth century traced their beginnings to the book of Romans with its emphasis that we are saved by grace and we live by faith. And our baptist ancestors didn't disagree with that. But the radical reformation wing, our ancestors re-discovered the Sermon on the Mount as central. They kept asking, "What if Jesus meant for us to live this out, today, in this place and in this time?"

My friend Barry Harvey at Baylor has a book called *Another City: An Ecclesiological primer for a Post-Christian World*. In it he notes the seventeenth century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes' assertion that this world is driven by an assumption of the *bellum omnia contra omnes*, "the war of all against all." Hobbes said that from time immemorial, violent competition has been the way of

the world and peace in this system is only possible by total domination of one against all others, like the Pax Romana of ancient times.

Through history most have assumed this culture of violent competition is the only possibility. But, Harvey argues, the early church envisioned another city and created a community based on peaceful cooperation. I think, to varying degrees, the history of the church since has been a continuing contest between these alternative visions, with the church too often being co-opted into trying to achieve its ends by the world's means, thus betraying our core identity. We end up being just as mean, brutish and nasty as Hobbes said the world is.

In a recent survey, young adults outside the church were asked what they perceived Christians and the church believed. 91% said that they believed that Christians were anti-homosexual, 87% believed that we were judgmental, and 85% said we were hypocritical. Which is no wonder young adults are running from the church (see Shane Claiborne in *Christian Reflection*, "Sermon on the Mount," p. 69). Our own Michael Chism and I have talked about this a lot. He says that his friends, most of whom are in their mid to late 20's are leaving the church as fast as they can because they believe the church is mean.

As I heard someone say, "Jesus needs some good lawyers, because he's been terribly misrepresented."

Maybe people will be flabbergasted, astounded, and astonished when they hear what the Bible and Jesus actually say.

With the deep deficits, the legislatures in Washington and Austin are about to try balance the budget on the backs of school children, the poor, the elderly, the sick, and the good earth, while protecting the wealthy corporate powers. It should

make you want to scream for justice and righteousness like a Hebrew prophet of old. This last year, big mouth Glen Beck said that you should leave any church that talks about justice. He said that “social justice” talk is code language for a church being atheist and Marxist. Let me tell you the truth, when it comes to the Bible, Jesus, and the Christian faith, Glen Beck does not have the sense that God gave a goose. He needs to actually read the Bible instead of spouting off about it. The Old Testament prophets speak little about sex; they say nothing about divorce and families falling apart. But all the prophets from Samuel to Jesus talk a lot about “justice and righteousness,” caring for the poor, especially helpless widows and orphans; they talk about giving laborers their fair share, welcoming the stranger, and offering hospitality to the foreigner, to the immigrant. The prophets say that if you are going to know God and walk with God, then you have to practice and care about justice for the poor. You can’t get around it. It’s all here in the old book, the Bible. You can look it up. To the prophets, the measure of a nation was how it cared for “the least of these” and those who didn’t could expect disaster. Read Micah, which is our Old Testament reading for today. Go back and read Amos. Over these next few weeks, the lectionary will have us reading a lot from the prophets, along with the Sermon on the Mount.

No matter what loud mouths like Glen Beck say, this is not a partisan issue, because the differences between the Republicans and the Democrats are slight in this regard. For them it’s about power; it’s a version of violent competition. And you and I both know, as citizens, we are responsible to engage in the political process out of our deepest conscience. But as followers of Jesus we are always citizens of “another city;” we live differently. Violent competition is not our way, lest we become shrill, angry contrarians, the shadow image of those we oppose. We are people of a different Way. For me, this is about Jesus. If we are serious

about Jesus Christ, then we have to pay attention to what he teaches. In the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us most clearly what his Way looks like. And what he says is astonishing news!

Look at who were there to hear Jesus speak these Beatitudes and hear the Sermon on the Mount. At the end of Matthew 4, it says, “So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan” (4:24-25). Now, while we’re not sure who else was there, we do know that the down-and-out, the left-out, the ground-out, beaten-down, the troubled, the sick, the poor, the helpless, and the hopeless were there to hear Jesus. The very people who knew they were not blessed just like they know they are not blessed in today’s world. Indeed, they believe that they are cursed. Yet Jesus is telling them they are blessed. Jesus is telling them that God knows and cares and blesses them.

And they were astonished.

My friend Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove tells of leading a Bible Study in Durham, North Carolina made up of about half seminary students and half with homeless and people who were poor. They were reading the Beatitudes together and when they finished, there was silence. No one said a word. Then one of the homeless men, who lived in the homeless shelter, asked, “You mean Jesus said that?” And Jonathan nodded. The man got excited. “Jesus is talking to us, man!” He sat up on the edge of his chair and smiled and laughed, “We’re the poor. We’re the ones who are crying and hungry and thirsty. And Jesus says we’re blessed!”

And they were astonished.

Years ago when I lived in Atlanta and was a member of Oakhurst Baptist Church, we had a Wed. night supper in the fellowship hall. It was a mixture of church members, mostly professors and professionals, along with men from the church's homeless shelter. One night, the question was, "Why are you in this church?" Someone spoke up, "I'm glad to be a part of a church that is open-minded and not afraid to think." Another said, "I'm a musician and I appreciate the classical music on Sunday mornings." Someone else, "I like the good preaching." Then one of the homeless men stood up. He had been addicted to crack cocaine on the streets and stumbled into the church's shelter begging for help. The director told him that he would try to get him into a rehab program but that it might take awhile, but if he would stick with the church in this shelter, they would do all they could to help him stay clean and sober. Then they had knelt in the floor and prayed together. That was three years before. The man said, "God saved me in this church."

Everyone looked sheepishly at one another. We were there for the music and thinking nice thoughts. He was there for salvation.

Astonishing.

Steve Shoemaker, when he was at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth remembers their Agape Meal, when hungry and homeless people are fed around round dinner tables in fellowship hall every Thursday night and then they have the Lord's Supper in the chapel for anyone and everyone. There was a woman named Amanda, a transsexual who took two years to make it from the dinner table to the Communion Table. She talked about coming to the Lord's Table as she tried to

gather her courage. When she came, when she got to the Lord's Table, she said, I've never felt more loved and accepted and blessed in my whole life than here on Thursday nights. And all my life I've been told this is the last place I'd be welcome.

Astonishing.

Amen.