

Epiphany 4, Year A,

Sermon by Glenn A. Brumbaugh

2nd February, 2020

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 NRSV / Matthew 5:1-12 NRSV

“Alternate facts” is a term we’ve all become familiar with in the last several years.

When this phrase first began to be used in the last presidential election,
many of the late night talk show hosts had quite a field day with that term,
and we still hear it inserted here and there
when traditional wisdom and reasoning
would demonstrate something to be a fact,
yet another viewpoint emerges refuting that assumption,
often based on opinion,
or simply stating that the factual truth is irrelevant.

In short, it is the notion that what is considered a fact
can vary depending on your particular viewpoint.

In this postmodern age in which we live,
those hallmarks of establishing what was truth and fact,
things like logical reasoning and scientific proofs
are slowly losing prominence.

Today, particularly with younger generations,
facts and truth are more and more determined
by what makes sense based on our own viewpoint and perspective,

not what traditionally has been determined

by methods of logic and reasoning refined over millenia,

from Socrates and Plato through the Age of Enlightenment.

Now I'm sure we have a variety of opinions regarding this recent development,

but in our walk as Christians, I think this is an interesting topic.

It boils down to what we consider truth to be.

Is it what we believe to be true,

based on the views and attitudes of ourselves and our peers.

Is it what our social group values?

Or is the truth in our lives something different altogether?

This week we start a series of lessons on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.

What are we to make of the Beatitudes?

Are they the facts, the absolute truth in our lives?

Or are they alternate facts, lofty goals to shoot for but never obtain?

This is not a new debate.

Biblical scholars in the church have argued both sides for many centuries.

But the problem with scholars, is they often focus so much

on every minor detail and nuance that they miss the bigger picture.

Jesus preached the Beatitudes to a certain audience at a specific point in time.

These were people living under the domination of the Roman Empire,

whose only religious context and reference

was controlled and maintained by the Jewish elite,

who were in collusion with the Romans.

They manipulated the dialogue. They determined what the facts were.

The Beatitudes were a powerful statement by Jesus

that God's favor did not rest with those in privilege and power.

God isn't siding those who's status is determined by wealth or success.

The Creator Jesus presents is intentionally coming out

on the side of the weak, the despised, the justice seekers,

the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for their beliefs.

These people were humble and meek by circumstance,

they were in mourning for the freedom and opportunities

that had been lost in their domination by others.

They sought justice and truly hungered and thirsted for righteousness

in their circumstances that often bordered on being dire.

For the disciples and the crowd following Jesus,

these statements were ones of recognition

that they were blessed as the downtrodden of society.

The tense of the original Greek verbs in this passage is indicative,

which means the action is an observation,

not an instruction or command.

Jesus was relaying that God was on their side,

that they were blessed by the Almighty.

But in another sense, he was also laying out

the foundational values of the Kingdom that draws near.

And these values are not a new concept.

Much of the teachings and stories in Matthew

have a strong connection and correlation to the prophets of the Old Testament.

Many of our first readings have been from Isaiah,

and they are directly quoted in Matthew.

This week's text echoes many of the values

expressed through later prophets like Micah.

And while individual verses may have special meaning to us

as we encounter similar difficulties as those in Jesus time and in the early church,

there are some overall themes to consider in this passage as well.

Today I'd like to look at three themes: simplicity, hopefulness and compassion.

Simplicity in this context is not simply a lack of sophistication.

It is taking these words of Jesus as they are, not how we'd like them to be,

or how we might make them fit into our world

instead of the other way around.

We don't make the values of the Beatitudes fit into our viewpoints of the world,

to make them fit our perspective.

We don't twist or adapt them to fit into our cultural values

in 21st century America.

We view them as they are, as simple truths spoken directly to us as well.

To try to contextualize them to fit our criteria

is to make them “alternate facts.”

Jesus tells us that we will be blessed in this life

whenever we demonstrate humility,

bring a peaceful presence, open our hearts to others,

and show mercy for those who cry for it.

Hearing and following Jesus' words, simply spoken,

is the first step for living into the Beatitudes.

Sadly, I don't think any of us would argue that our world

has a serious shortage of hopefulness today.

Unfortunately, theologian Juergen Moltmann points out

that the death knell for the church occurs

when anger turns to cynicism.

Cynicism decides to accept whatever is, despite the consequences.

Cynicism offers little hope that things will get better.

The mantra of cynics is “Don't worry about it.

That's just the way things are. You will get used to it.”

But we shouldn't just “get used to it.”

This is a rare occasion when anger is a positive emotion, in the proper dose.

The injustice we see in our country and the world should make us angry.

We should be driven to do something about it, as individuals,

as congregations, as denominations, as Christ's disciples today.

The Beatitudes call us to the opposite point of view from cynicism,

which is hopefulness.

We place our hope in Christ, who offered hope to the hopeless.

When we step forward in Christ,

we are able to approach the world with a spirit of hope,

even when there are many signs to the contrary.

He's demonstrated there is another way to things,

a different order that supersedes the priorities we would make..

We can work with the hope that we can be Christ's agents

to bring forth a world of mercy, of humility, of peace and love.

However, all that is achieved through compassion, not cynicism.

But the compassion I'm talking about is not simply pity or sympathy.

It's much deeper than that.

To have pity for another person means you feel sorry for them.

To have sympathy means you can understand

what another person is experiencing,

and can comfort them or offer advice.

And those are admirable qualities.

But the compassion of Christ is what the late Henri Nouwen described

as the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you.

This partnership cuts through all walls

that might have separated you.

Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty,

knowledge and ignorance, we are one,
created from the same dust, subject to the same struggles,
and destined for the same end.

We are all distinct individuals but we all share in being created in God's image.

We are all part of that same family.

Compassion isn't walking the same path with someone,
it's walking in their shoes.

When we think of our faith priorities, are we reading the message of Jesus
in his context or our own?

Do we take our cue from worldly powers who tell us what Christian values are
or do we actually get those values from Christ?

How often do we really try to step into another's shoes
and try to see things from their point of view?

And do we have hope in bringing forth the Kingdom,
or are we cynical, and resigned to accepting the status quo?

The Beatitudes are a powerful guidebook
not only for the values that God blesses,
but also the themes that Christ calls us to live out and seek in the world.

What does it look like to live out those values?

There's a powerful story told of a family who understood humility and living justly.

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989,
no person in all of East Germany was more despised

than the former Communist dictator Erich Honniker.

He had been stripped of all his offices.

Even the Communist Party rejected him.

Kicked out of his villa, the new government

refused him and his wife new housing.

The Honnikers were homeless and destitute.

Enter pastor Uwe Holmer, director of a Christian help center north of Berlin.

Made aware of the Honnikers' straits,

Pastor Holmer felt it would be wrong

to give them a room at his center

meant for even needier people.

So the pastor and his family decided to take the former dictator

into their own home.

Erich Honniker's wife, Margot,

had ruled the East German educational system for twenty-six years.

Eight of Pastor Holmer's ten children had been turned down

for higher education due to Mrs. Honniker's policies,

which discriminated against Christians.

Now the Holmers were caring for their personal enemy,

the most hated man in Germany.

This was so unnatural, so unconventional, so Christlike.

By the grace of God, the Holmers loved their enemies,

did them good, blessed them, and prayed for them.

They turned the other cheek.

They gave their enemies their coat (their own home).

They did to the Honnikers what they would have wished the Honnikers would have done for them all those years before.

Now it would be a great story if I told you that the Honnikers were changed by the actions and witness of the Holmer family but there is no evidence that ever occurred...

However, that is not the emphasis of the story.

The emphasis is the fact that the Holmer family lived what they believed.

Sadly our news today is full of those who respond quite differently.

The values we are presented as "normal"

seem to be in direct contrast to those of the Beatitudes.

We glorify those who exemplify selfishness, greed, ignorance, and meanness.

Some would even tell us that God has ordained individuals who exemplify these qualities in our leadership.

Yet Jesus shows us something much different in today's reading.

I wonder which we should believe,

those who lift up the antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount,

or the one who actually preached that sermon?

So what do we do, how do we cope?

To quote the prophet Micah, what does the Lord require of you?

To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

That's a "real fact" that's even short enough to tweet.

May we seek a life that is blessed according to the values of the Beatitudes,
values that are not "alternative." Amen.