

## Worship Service *“Fool's Errand”*

Epiphany 4, Year A, 29th January, 2023

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

**Prelude**

**Hailey Nappen**

**Opening Music [Video]**

**[God's Own Fool](#)**

**Michael Card**

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## Welcome Guests / Announcements

**Pass the Peace**

**Opening Hymn**      *What is this place*      **1**

## Call to Worship /Invocation

O God, you are the gathering one who calls us into community with each other to love and work, to support and heal.

You are the gathering one who calls us into community with all people; to bring justice and hope, freedom and truth.

You are the gathering one who calls us into community with the whole creation; to live in harmony, to cherish and renew.

Let us worship the God who makes us one. Amen

*Sinead O'Connor*

## Epistle Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 NRSV

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,

but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are,

so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

## **A Time of Prayer**

### **Joys and Concerns**

#### **Pastoral Prayer**

God of the prophets, God of Christ: we are reminded today that your blessings do not necessarily follow the logic of the world.

The world believes that the rich are blessed, but Jesus reminds us that it is the poor who are blessed, the poor in spirit and the materially poor as well. We pray for a more just world in which all have enough and none are left behind.

Though we fear death and avoid its inevitable arrival, Jesus tells us that those who mourn are blessed. Help us to experience the truth of this mystery;

bring healing and wholeness to those who are sick; and comfort those of us who have lost loved ones.

While people covet power, Jesus blesses the meek; instruct us, O God, in the ways of humility; help us to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized; show us your presence in the faces of those the world forgets.

Give us a hunger and thirst for righteousness; fill our hearts with love, overflowing with mercy; make our hearts pure, and give us a vision of your glory.

In a society divided by race, gender, class, ideology, sexual orientation, and so many other labels we alone have created, remind us that we are created in your image, each of us a beautiful reflection of you, each of us your beloved child. Help us then to end our conflicts and wars, help us to be peacemakers and agents of reconciliation.

Gracious God, you have so richly blessed us with life, with love and joy, with hope in the midst of despair. Help us to be the salt of the earth. Help us to be the light of the world, sharing with others that which we have received, boldly proclaiming the good news of your love, finding the seeds of your kingdom within us and letting your way grow in our lives and throughout the world.

Give us eyes to see the ways you are changing the world in which we live. Give us ears to hear your call to join with you in the great transformation.

Hear us now, o God, as we pray for the coming of your kingdom, Amen

**Hymn**                                      *Be Thou My Vision - 545*

**Gospel Reading:**      **Matthew 5:1-12 NRSV**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

**Message - Fool's Errand**

"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 recent political discourse, 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. More recently, Q-Anon may be a more recognizable term when referencing this concept. In short, it's the idea 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 millennia, from Socrates and Plato through the Age of Enlightenment.

Now I'm sure we have a variety of opinions regarding this relatively 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 whose 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 recently 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 I may have shared before 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 Honniger. 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 Honniger'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. Honniger'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 proverbial coat (their own home). They did to the Honniger's what they would have wished the Honniger's would have done for them all those years before.

Now it would be a great story if I told you that the Honniger's 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. Many

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? It can be difficult work though, what some would call a "fool's errand." To try to live out the Beatitudes is what is often considered foolish by modern cultural standards.

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.

## Reflection on the Word

### A Call to Serve

God has led us to this place to heal and inspire us, to gently redirect us, until we see the world as God does and love it with God's love. With our gifts, we affirm that God's generosity can make us all into a new creation by the way we give of ourselves.

### A Time for Reflection - *Musical Interlude*

### Prayer of Thanksgiving

Liberator Christ, you went to the top of a mountain, and taught a sacred word about the meek and the grief stricken, about the lost and the lonely. Come to this place now, and by these gifts help us to see the world not as it is, but as it could be, that we may become good news to all. **Amen.**

**HYMN**                      *Will You Let Me be Your Servant*      **307**

### Benediction

Go now, with God's foolishness and weakness as your only wisdom and strength. Proclaim Christ crucified, and seek riches only in the love of God's Word and in zeal for God's house.

And may God's just demands be your nourishment & delight. May Christ be the power and wisdom of God to you. And may the Holy Spirit keep you, thought and word, in God's good grace. We go in peace to love and serve the Lord, **Amen.**

### Postlude

Anna Callendar