

### **Micah 6:1-4, 6-8**

<sup>6</sup>Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. <sup>2</sup>Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. <sup>3</sup>“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! <sup>4</sup>For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

<sup>6</sup>“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? <sup>7</sup>Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” <sup>8</sup>He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

### **Matthew 5:1-12**

<sup>5</sup>When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup>“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup>“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup>“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

### **A New Reality**

#### 1. Church story

Pastor Edward Markquart tells a story of his first memory of a cross; it was in his hometown of Jackson, Minnesota, a small city that lay right along Interstate 90, a major east-west thoroughfare for truckers.<sup>i</sup> The town lay in a valley, and at night, from the ridgeline of the surrounding hills, the lights of the little city looked spectacular. It just so happened that there were Methodists in the town who had decided to build a new church. This was 1955. It was a spectacular church, built on the east side of town, with a very high spire on the steeple, and on the top of that spire, the highest object in town, there was a neon cross, a pink neon cross. At night that cross shone brightly for all the truck drivers passing along the highway to see.

Well, the Lutherans felt a bit uncomfortable with the pink Methodist cross, though they said nothing to their Methodist friends about this. Feeling the need to evangelize in similar manner, the Lutherans embarked upon a project of their own; they would put a new cross on the top of their steeple. The problem was their steeple wasn't as high as the steeple of the Methodist church, so they designed a wide, sturdy cross, reflecting the sturdy character of the Lutherans

who constructed it, erected this structure, and flooded it with the brightest lighting available so that those truck drivers could enjoy the splendor of the Lutheran cross as well as the Methodist cross as they drove through Jackson, Minnesota at night.

Now as you probably figured out there was a Catholic church on the west side of town, and the good folks of that church determined that it was time for them to build a new church and, of course, a new cross to place on their new, high-altitude spire. Their cross was shiny bronze and illuminated by the brightest of flood lights. Thus truck drivers passing through the holy city of Jackson, Minnesota at night could see three bright crosses shining in the sky, just as there were three crosses at Calvary where our Savior was crucified (the Lutherans, whose church was closest to the center of town, noted with satisfaction that their cross was the central cross like the one that Jesus occupied while the Catholic and Methodist crosses flanked it, like the criminals on either side of Jesus. Because this all took place over fifty years ago, I'd be curious to see just how many other crosses adorn the night sky over Jackson, Minnesota and just who claims the brightest or the tallest cross in town.

## 2. Entrenched in our mindset

It's funny how we embark on so many silly endeavors and justify them in the name of religion. In the Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of the foolishness of the cross being greater than human wisdom.<sup>ii</sup> And when Paul speaks of the cross, he's not just talking about an object made of wood, or brass, or stainless steel or neon. He's talking about God's entire strategy in Jesus Christ. God intentionally does something that seems so opposed to human reason, to our way of thinking, that it draws our attention and forces us to think outside the box we've been used to thinking in. God humbles himself, limits himself, submits himself to *our* authority, and dies a criminal after living a life devoted to loving those who would reject him. The resurrection represents our waking up to the truth of God's nature as embodied in Jesus Christ. Paul describes the cross as both with wisdom and the power of God, and those who comprehend this know what this power is. It is a power that is capable of completely turning our lives upside down, of changing our ways, our priorities, our cares and concerns. It can transform us if we allow it to. Yet too often, even when we "get it," when we say that we understand what the cross means, what it calls us to do, we refuse to budge from our silly, selfish ways. We are susceptible to our own "wisdom," the kind of wisdom that inspires good Christians like the folks of Jackson, Minnesota to compete with one another to see whose cross can shine the brightest.

We are always prone to distort God's word, God's message, into something we find more palatable, something that better fits our needs, our agenda. Let's take, for example, today's Gospel reading. We commonly refer to this passage as the Beatitudes (about blessings; "Blessed are...blessed are...blessed are..."). I used to understand these passages as Jesus consoling the down and out – the poor, the meek, the persecuted – by promising them some future relief – Jesus serving them Pepto Bismal. *"Good job, guys! I know it's rough, and I know life makes you feel nauseous, but I promise it's a lot better in heaven, for you especially."* It's

God's pity for the poor, the meek, the downtrodden. These folks need a blessing; they need all the help they can get! Meanwhile I'm glad I'm not poor in spirit. I'm *blessed not to be* poor in spirit. I'm blessed not be persecuted. I'm blessed because I'm among the richest people in the world, with all the modern conveniences and choices and luxuries, living in safety. That's what it means to be blessed, right? The poor, the persecuted, the meek are blessed because of what they will receive, namely some relief from their suffering. I, on the other hand, am currently blessed and expect to remain blessed. Then, when I die, I go to "the kingdom of heaven" along with the meek and the poor and persecuted.

### 3. Two misconceptions

I've expressed two common misconceptions, or misinterpretations that people commonly make. The first has to do with *blessing*. The Greek word used in the earliest writings is μακάριος (pronounced 'makarias'). Scholars dispute how to translate this word, but some have noted that "happy" is certainly not a good translation (happy are those who mourn?), and 'blessed' is also a misleading translation. In the Old Testament a blessing was bestowed by God or a father or patriarch and was followed by a growth in family or flock or land in the present life. μακάριος may be better translated as "honored" more than blessed, as looked upon with approval by God and the community as someone *doing something* noble, praiseworthy. It's not something you passively receive like a birthright. It's bestowed upon you because you have chosen to do something. The poor in spirit are "honored" because they have emptied themselves of themselves and thus come to rely upon God entirely. Those who mourn are "honored" because they have sincere love for others who suffer or die, particularly those who die as a result of injustice. The meek are "honored" because they have chosen not to join the rat race for wealth and power that consumes others. "Honored" are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness because they take a stand against injustice. "Honored" are the merciful, those who freely give what they too have freely received. "Honored" are the pure in heart, those who always think the best of others and do the best they can for others. "Honored" are the peacemakers, those who realize that violence only leads to more violence. "Honored" are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The second misunderstanding has to do with the kingdom of heaven. We should recognize that Jesus was speaking in terms that his audience would comprehend – they knew what it was to live in a kingdom. We Americans are not so fond of kings or kingdoms, so it may be helpful to use different terminology. Some have translated it "reign of God," but this sounds almost as regal. A more modern expression is "new reality." However we express it, we should understand it as a present reality; it is here and now, not a spiritual realm that begins in the future. In the previous chapter of Matthew Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven "has come near."<sup>iii</sup> When we put the kingdom at such a distance in time and location, it conveniently allows us to delay action in the here and now. We can put off any change of heart or change of behavior knowing, in the back of our minds that when life here is about to end we can just plead for forgiveness and mercy and be whisked away into God's kingdom where we'll meet up with the meek and the poor in spirit and the persecuted. By placing the kingdom of heaven in the distant future we

feel we can run up our sin account like purchases on a credit card figuring we don't need to pay it back until the due date, whenever that is.

#### 4. Living in relationship with God

We enter the kingdom when we embrace God's embrace, when we comprehend God's foolishness and start living foolishly, according to his value system, not ours. When we embrace God, and we are aware of this new reality in which we dwell, we do hunger and thirst for righteousness, we do seek peace, we are poor in spirit, we are meek, we mourn for those who suffer and die, and we are persecuted because we live in solidarity with others who are persecuted.

Living in the kingdom is living in loving relationship with God and with others. This was what the Israelites did not understand in our Old Testament passage. God is upset with them, and they ask him, "Well, what do you want us to do to make things better? Do you want our sheep? Our cows? Our firstborn?!"

"No," God answers. "I want you to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."<sup>iv</sup> *Walk humbly with your God! I just want to walk with you.*

#### 5. Conclusion

The Beatitudes are not just Jesus taking pity on certain people who have no power over their own circumstances. Jesus is commending those who have chosen to live in a way that God has called us to live now. We are challenged to do the same. How well are you following God's directions? Is there something that you've been putting off because you think that you have time before the curtain falls? If so, make the change now, not down the road. The "new reality" is here and now and available to all who desire to follow the living Christ. I urge you to dwell in that new reality, as a new creation in Christ.

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<sup>i</sup>Pastor Edward F. Markquart, Grace Lutheran Church, Seattle, Washington - *Sermons from Seattle*: "The Cross: the Hidden Face of God." [http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series\\_a\\_the\\_cross.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_the_cross.htm)

<sup>ii</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18.

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 4:17

<sup>iv</sup> Micah 6:8