

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 5:1–12

Gospel Summary

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five blocks of teaching in Matthew. This is a deliberate design by Matthew; Jesus is the new Torah. In the next three chapters, we have some of the most concentrated teaching by Jesus. In each case, Jesus affirms the assertion in the Torah but then invites his followers to go beyond.

The Beatitudes (coming from the Latin and meaning blessed) are an introduction to the values of the kingdom. For most of us, success means being assertive, enjoying fine wine and good food, having money, and having control. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus shocks the crowd by explaining that actually those who are most blessed—those who are happiest—are those who are gentle, hungry, merciful, and focused on being a peacemaker. Jesus turns the world upside down: the values that we admire are not the values that God admires. We value assertion and power, but if we step back and see our lives from the perspective of the eternal, the invitation of this Gospel is to learn to value humility and peace.

Possible Themes for Preaching

- The Kingdom is upside down: we need to look at the world in unconventional ways.
- Jesus is the New Torah.
- Happiness is not buying into conventional values.

Humorous Story

A young couple, both of whom are talented musicians, go on a honeymoon. They pick the hotel in Vienna next to the cemetery of Beethoven. They both love the music of Ludwig van Beethoven. As they are falling asleep, they are woken by an extraordinary noise. They listen carefully and work out that it is Beethoven's Fifth being played backward. But it soon stops and they fall asleep. The same

thing happens on the second night. Once again it is Beethoven's Fifth being played backward. But it soon stops and they fall asleep. On the third night, their sleep is disturbed once again. This time, they decide to investigate. Rather nervously, they make their way down the hall, heading toward the music. Beethoven's Fifth being played backward is coming from downstairs. They walk nervously down the stairs. Beethoven's Fifth being played backward is coming from outside. They walk through the big hotel door. Beethoven's Fifth being played backward is coming from the cemetery. They walk toward the cemetery. Beethoven's Fifth being played backward is coming from the grave. Now they are really nervous. They walk to the grave side and peer down.

And what do you think they saw?

Yes, you are right: Beethoven DECOMPOSING.

Homiletical Connection

God wants us to listen carefully. Instead of hearing everything the "normal way round," we need to listen to everything being "backward." Instead of admiring ruthless success, we need to learn to admire humble service. Instead of admiring acquisition and luxury, we need to learn to admire a simplicity of lifestyle. The former is a result of us admiring each other. The invitation of this Gospel is to look at everything from the eternal perspective. This means listening to the music carefully and learning to recognize that God plays everything backward.

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 5:13–20

Gospel Summary

For Matthew, the precise relationship of the teaching of Jesus to the Torah is important. Unlike certain passages in Paul, Jesus fulfills the Law. He is taking the fundamental values that underpin the Torah and invites his disciples to live those values to the full. For Matthew, Christianity is never in contradiction to the Torah; instead, it is building on the Torah and moving beyond the Torah.

The humor in this passage is explicit. Hearers would have smiled at the thought of someone buying a light and then hiding it in a bushel basket. The teaching is demanding, but the invitation is gentle.

So what is the message? Salt is salty. Light provides illumination. Laws provide structure. Prophets analyze our times and anticipate the future. If salt were not salty, would we still consider it salt? If light were hidden away, how would we see by it? In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is clear that we are to fulfill our purpose in order to bring glory to God. Our purpose is to be exactly who we are—people of God living on earth. Jesus reminds us he did not come to abolish the covenant obligations given in the Torah. Rather, he came to fulfill them. Jesus embodies the goal of the Torah—the goal of having our lives orientated toward God. The invitation is to show God's presence by the way we live our lives. We are to let our light shine within our own contexts so that God's glory is known to others. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and we are to continue being so for ourselves and for the sake of others.

Possible Themes for Preaching

- The Gospel is an invitation to live a transformed life grounded in the practices of love.
- Jesus is the fulfillment of the law: we are not an anti-Jewish religion.
- The teaching is demanding, but the invitation is gentle.

Humorous Story

An Episcopal priest stands in the front of a church to begin a Sunday service. The sanctuary is large and full of people. Suddenly, his microphone breaks into pieces and a high shrill rings throughout the space. He lifts his hands and says, “Something went wrong with my microphone,” and the people respond, “And also with you.”

Homiletical Connection

Even in the midst of confusing or unpredictable times, our experiences and knowledge help guide us. We are also led forward by instruction and guidance from people we trust. Our lives are filled with reminders of who we are and what our purpose or direction is. Those reminders help guide our actions. In the case of the story, the people know the response to the beginning of the church service, even though the priest did not start it correctly. Their life experience helped guide their action. In faith, Jesus reminds us that the path forward is to let our light shine. We are orientated toward God, so that our actions are a beacon for those around us of God’s light and glory.

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Proper 1

Matthew 5:21–37

Gospel Summary

It is important to notice that Jesus here is not taking issue with the commandment (which is, after all, one of the Big Ten). “Thou shalt not murder” is still true. But his point is that it does not go far enough. We need to go beyond the idea that it is only the actual murder that is the problem. This is his pattern throughout the Sermon on the Mount. The law says this, but I say to you . . . We can easily be very literal. “Well, we didn’t actually kill that person, but I did hate him, gossip about him, call him a fool.”

The point is Jesus wants us not simply to be good in terms of actions, but also to be good in terms of our dispositions, intentions, and motives. So, of course, you shouldn't murder, but Jesus doesn't want us to get angry or even insult others. On adultery, Jesus explains, that the action is wrong, but so is the all-consuming lust for another. Jesus wants us to be good both on the inside and the outside.

Possible Themes for Preaching

- Our interior life matters as much as our actions.
- Going behind the commandments: don't imagine that doing everything short of adultery is okay.
- Christians are called to have a righteousness that exceeds that of those around us.

Humorous Story

A Frenchman is a specialist at stealing famous works of art from the Louvre. He is very skilled at getting paintings out. However, as he climbed into his van, he only drove two miles before it ran out of gas right in front of a policeman who was searching for him. The policeman scratched his head and said, "How did you make this mistake? Fancy not filling up the van with gas." The thief replied: "I had no Monet to buy Degas to make the Van Gogh."

Homiletical Connection

The thief is not a very good thief. Although he succeeded in stealing these priceless works of arts, he failed to think through his getaway. Christians are called to be good Christians. It isn't simply what we do that matters, but also our interior life and disposition. If you are going to be a thief (which of course the church does not commend), then be a good one; if you are going to be a Christian, then be a good one. Worry not simply about actions, but also our internal life.

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Proper 2

Matthew 5:38–48

Gospel Summary

This passage in Matthew's Gospel continues the Sermon on the Mount. The main mandate of Scripture is: "We are to love our enemies." Christianity is not easy. Instead, we are charged to love even those who treat us worst of all.

For many commentators, here Jesus is teaching pacifism. The practice of the Church for the first three hundred years was pacifist. A contrast is constantly drawn: being nice to our friends and hating our enemies the regular ethic of the world; the Kingdom followers are called to seek to love everyone.

It was Walter Wink in "Jesus and Nonviolence" who argued that turning our cheeks, giving our cloaks, and walking a second mile are skillful vehicles of passive resistance. The legal obligation to a Roman centurion who requires you to walk one mile with his baggage is radically inconvenienced when you then carry on walking away with his baggage.

Possible Themes for Preaching

- We are obligated to love, even those who make our lives really difficult.
- Jesus the pacifist is made clear.
- We can and should resist injustice; we should never resort to violence.

Humorous Story

A Quaker farmer was milking a cow into a bucket. When it was almost full, the cow moved and kicked the bucket over, spilling the milk. Without a word the farmer cleaned up the milk and tried again. When it was half full the cow moved and again the bucket went flying. The farmer gave a loud sigh, mopped the spilled milk, and started over. Right as he was beginning again, the cow moved

a third time and kicked the bucket over. This time the farmer rose slowly to his feet and walked around to face the cow. Grasping her head and looking straight into her eyes, he said, “Friend Daisy, thou has been a most faithful animal and thou must know that I am a Quaker and cannot harm thee. But I must say that if thou were to kick over the bucket once more, I shall sell thee to the Baptist who owns the farm down the lane!”

Homiletical Connection

Sometimes life gets challenging. Sometimes, like the farmer, it seems worth it to sell cows who are uncooperative. Sometimes it is easier to be mad than it is to be loving. Jesus reminds us that love is not easy, but it is foundational to our faith and life. Hatred breeds hatred; love breeds love. We must make the hard choice to walk the extra mile, give up our cloak or transformer toy or seat on the swing, and turn the other cheek as expressions of the love we know to be true because of Jesus.

Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany, Proper 3

Matthew 6:24–34

Gospel Summary

This teaching really starts at verse 19: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust* consume and where thieves break in and steal.” And here we have an extended reflection on getting our life focus right.

It is a demanding and difficult teaching. Christians are persons who follow Christ. But here in this Gospel, we have a commandment from Jesus that almost everyone disobeys, and most of us (if we are honest) don’t really believe. Jesus commands us saying, “Do not worry about your life.” Worry is very crippling. Worry rarely helps; it almost always makes the problem we face even worse. “Worry,” says Jesus, “does not add a single hour to our life.” Instead, explains

Jesus, we should learn to trust God. Indeed by striving “first for the kingdom of God”—by striving to live within a supportive community—all the basics of life will be given for you.

Possible Themes for Preaching

- Live better, worry less.
- Focus on the eternal, not on the ephemeral.
- We need to learn to trust God: turn every worry into a prayer.

Humorous Story

Wellness studies are very interesting. The conceit of the young is that aging is pretty scary. They imagine a downward graph of misery, which gets worse year after year, until you die. But actually this is wrong. From a variety of studies (the largest involving 355,344) where folks are asked about their “global well-being,” the results show that well-being for the average human is U-shaped.

Humans are happiest in our twenties and in our seventies. The twenties make considerable sense: there life just stretches out as exciting potential—like a piece of paper upon which nothing is so far written—life is just endless possibilities. One is fit, energetic, free from the endless observation of parents, and able to just seize life. The seventies are more puzzling; but what seems to go on there is that the gift of each day is appreciated. One has seen everything and therefore worries less about everything. The stresses of career or relationships have dissipated. Hopefully one is able to retire. Then work is over. As a result, there is a certain graciousness about each and every day.

The bottom of the U is your early fifties. This is the sandwich generation, where you have both kids and parents to worry about. Retirement is still some way off, and the stress of getting there is looming. Will I have enough in my pension? Half of us are on our second marriage, with all the stress that causes. One is aware that one has got about as far as one can in one’s career; so career disappointment is setting in. One is inevitably miserable.

Homiletical Connection

And so we come to Jesus. There is a link between twenties and the seventies: you worry less. In your twenties and your seventies, you are not trying to feed a family, pay a mortgage, support children and elderly parents. As a result your worries are less serious. And in your fifties, you are doing all these things. So you worry constantly. The gift of this Gospel is to learn to trust God and participate fully in a Christian community. It can transform our disposition and give us a greater sense of well-being.

Ninth Sunday after the Epiphany, Proper 4

Matthew 7:21–29

Gospel Summary

This is all part of the Sermon on the Mount. It starts with a warning: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (v. 21). It goes on to say, “Only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” For Matthew, one does the will by obeying the Torah as explained by Jesus. Authenticity is important for Matthew.

In this Gospel passage, Jesus wants us not just to hear the gospel, but to practice the gospel. In any area of education, we must practice to learn. It is true in sports, in math, in reading, in art, and in music. It is not enough to simply read about it or hear about it, we must do in order to really learn. So it is with faith. In Matthew’s gospel, it is so important to pair the two that it is imagined as a house built on rock compared to a house built on sand. Anyone who has walked on a beach knows how a single gust of wind or misplaced footstep can create a weak and shifting foundation. So, instead, when we pair our hearing with our doing, we are solidifying our spiritual foundation in rock that is steady and firm.

Possible Themes for Preaching

- Jesus is the foundation of our lives.
- Being authentic is what matters: not just talking the talk, but walking the walk.
- Christianity and Judaism; Matthew sees Jesus as the true heir of the tradition of the Torah.

Humorous Story

An Episcopal bishop, a Roman Catholic priest, and a televangelist all go fishing on a boat. The Episcopal bishop realizes he has left something in the car. He gets up, walks across the water, and heads up to his car. The Roman Catholic priest wants to get his lunch. He too stands up, walks across the water, and heads to his car. As they are both returning, the bishop and priest meet up. They stop and stare at the televangelist, who has his head in his hands and is saying, “Lord, I can do this: give me the faith.” And they watch as he stands up, steps over the side of the boat, and starts flailing around in the water.

“Do you think we should have told him about the rocks just under the water?” the Roman Catholic priest asks.

The Episcopal bishop looks at him and says, “What rocks?”

Homiletical Connection

We all wish we could be the bishop! But perhaps we should just strive to be the person who finds the rocks underneath the water that keep us from drowning. Life is hard. Jesus promises to provide the rocks that enable us to cope with the demanding currents and challenges of the water.

Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Transfiguration)

Matthew 17:1–9

Gospel Summary

For a Gospel where the connection with the Old Testament is important, this is a central narrative. The law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah) affirm the significance of Jesus. Theologically the presence of these two is an endorsement of the identity of Jesus.

In terms of the experience, when miraculous things happen and we see people transformed before our eyes, it is understandable that we would want to remain in that moment. That moment is powerful; it carries enormous significance. When good things happen, we want to stay in that moment forever. So it is in this passage of Matthew's Gospel for Peter, James, and John. However, living has to embrace both the miraculous and the challenging. Living at the figurative (or real) top of the mountain is unsustainable, as the disciples found out abruptly through their experience of fear. We feed on the good moments in our faith journey so we are ready for the hard moments of that faith journey. We need a faith that can carry us through difficulties; this is the promise of this Gospel.

Possible Themes for Preaching

- The Eucharist is our mountaintop experience, which can become the basis of coping with the demands of living.
- The law and the prophets affirm the significance of Jesus.
- Don't let post-Enlightenment skepticism let us overlook the possibility of the extraordinary.

Humorous Story

Fred has been feeling depressed for some time. After much agonizing, he finally decides to make an appointment with a therapist. However, he discovers that the only appointment that he can get is with a young practitioner who is straight out of college. This doctor has never had a previous client. Fred is so desperate that he feels he

has no choice except to go and see this therapist. Fred arrives for his appointment, goes in, lies down on the couch and explains everything that is going on. Fred is desperate for some words of insight that will help him feel better. The young therapist asks several questions, takes some notes, and sits in silence for several minutes. Finally, the therapist thinks he has found the solution and says, “I think your problem is low self-esteem. It is very common among losers.”

Homiletical Connection

The gift of faith can help us through the hard moments—when we are losers and have a low self-esteem. And it partly does so by inviting us week in and week out to receive the mountaintop experience at the Lord’s Table—in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we feed on the divine life, which can help us cope with the demands of living.

First Sunday in Lent

Matthew 4:1–11

Gospel Summary

Lent arrives. Now we are starting to join with Jesus in the slow walk to Jerusalem. It is a season of self-examination, prayer, and recognition of our vulnerability, frailty, and sin. Here in this Gospel, Matthew makes important links with the Old Testament. Forty is a significant number: the rain fell for forty days and nights around Noah (Genesis 7:4), the Jewish people were in the wilderness for forty years (Exodus 16:35), and Moses was with God up on the mountain for forty days and nights (Exodus 24:18). To the initial readers of Matthew, all these connections were made. This is the moment in the life of Jesus when he is close to God and coping with the inevitable journey of the wilderness.

This story of temptation is challenging. The first temptation does not seem unreasonable: satisfy your hunger by providing a miracle. But the fast is part of the discipline, so Jesus says no. Then Jesus is invited to make his identity visible to the world by throwing himself