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Sermon notes January 29, 2017

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; I COR 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12.

Friends:

Please join me in a brief word of prayer: Lord Jesus, may my words please and glorify you, and may they be the blessing you intend for your people here this morning. Amen.

When I was young, I often behaved in a young & foolish way, but now that I'm old I often behave in an old & foolish way. Go figure! I surely agreed too quickly when asked if I would preach this morning, but I was reassured when looking at the assigned lessons for the first time, because I saw that they were familiar—that I had heard good preaching on these lessons many times, and that they were also to some extent part of our cultural fabric. This reassurance, however, was misguided, because the more closely I looked at the words, the more nuanced and essentially elusive they became.

Further, you all—myself included—are accustomed to hearing an incredibly high standard of preaching, so please be forewarned that this morning we're going from a 400-level standard suitable for spiritually mature graduate students to something more closely resembling a 100-level intro for first-years, just without the Powerpoint. Also, please forgive me if at times the remarks that follow start to sound a bit like a lecture, which after all what I do for a living. But rather than have me endlessly apologize for my message's shortcomings, let's just go ahead boldly and trust God to bless our time together.

So allow me to begin with a story from my past, Spring 1986 to be exact:

I was living in Tokyo and subscribed to the Japan Times in which a regular columnist asked why it is that every Christian he meets is some ignorant right-wing yahoo driving a pick-up with a gun in the back? I wrote a letter to the editor

that referenced today's Epistle lesson from 1COR without quoting the entire passage which reads as follows:

“¹⁸For 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. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.” This theme is reinforced in today's Gospel reading from the Sermon on the Mount, but we'll get there....

Powerful stuff – We need to be up front about the fact that Christianity looks foolish from a rational humanistic perspective and is by any standard endlessly counter-intuitive. Frankly, this is both a strength and a handicap.

Getting back to the tempest that brewed back in 1986, In my letter to the author of this uninformed slander masquerading as social commentary, I offered my credentials as a theologically conservative but politically liberal Christian intellectual: I had been trained at elite institutions and taught at a university; I had voted in the NY Democratic primary earlier that year for the Rev. Jesse Jackson; and I was at the time a member of a conservative Christian denomination.

None of this would have been particularly controversial but what I suggested to the columnist was what stirred the pot and generated weeks of pro-and-con letters to the editor: I told him that I personally regretted that he had never met a liberal Christian intellectual but that if he really wanted to meet others like me, it actually wasn't that hard—all he had to do was to visit almost any church on a Sunday morning and to hang around for coffee afterwards. If you do this, I promised him, you're virtually guaranteed to meet lots like me! Indeed, one of the things I just love about this congregation is that it's chock full of liberal Christian intellectuals who have come here for the one purpose of loving the lord Jesus.

Christianity is utterly counter-intuitive, endlessly surprising and confounding, and this has roots in our own Jewish spiritual past, as we see in today's passage from Micah. When we recall all that God has done for us collectively and individually, how can you and I ever "repay" the Lord? What gift would be sufficient? How much is enough, to put this crassly. The answer given in Micah is one of those passages that cuts to the quick; it rattles around and often comes to mind at the most inconvenient moments: "and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Does this not make us want to shout "Right on", but does it not also remind us that we live in a world where the big donors get the seats in front; the microphone gets passed to them first; a world where the honored get served their food, the choicest cuts, before the others? A world that often looks upon the act of walking humbly with one's God as evidence of mental infirmity?

So much of Christianity challenges what comes instinctively and what the world has preached for at least three thousand years from Hammurabi's Code to Laws of Manu, revenge is natural: an eye for an eye and tooth for tooth; the list goes on and on.

Forgiveness is what's unnatural and makes forgiveness difficult, requiring deliberate effort) → to me as a historian, this makes Christianity fundamentally revolutionary, and it surprises me that we don't speak more about this in NA since this has been part of its historical appeal.

You all have heard of Mahatma Gandhi, the pioneer of non-violent resistance and the father of modern India. Gandhi had serious problems with Christianity – his experience growing up was with missionaries who haughtily derided Hindus and Hinduism – but Gandhi loved the idea of forgiveness and the topsy-turvy world of Christian ethics that one finds a bit later in the Sermon on the Mount: "if a man hits you on one cheek...." Of all the Bible, Gandhi most loved the Sermon on the Mount, and so do many of us. Is this not Jesus at his most compelling? Do these words not resonate with us striking chords that endlessly reverberate, inspire, challenge and at the same time comfort?

This is what threw me off when I wrote a first draft for this morning, a draft that I had to basically rewrite yesterday and even into this morning. There are certain passages in scripture that can become so familiar that they become mantra-like: we repeat them so easily that we can actually do so without even thinking about them. In fact, one of the brilliant things we do at UHill—something I've seen done nowhere else—is to use hand-gestures when singing the Lord's Prayer, something which requires us to focus on the words physically as well as mentally.

The Beatitudes, (the “Blessed are-s...” of today's Gospel) has this quality of being so familiar that we think we know what it's saying until we really think about it. Forgive me, but until we stop and carefully interrogate the passage, I fear we have nothing much more than a kind of stick-figure Jesus who conforms to a pre-existing representation with which we've grown perhaps too comfortable. Let me explain by outlining several standard interpretations of Jesus that all find reinforcement in the Sermon on the Mount and especially the Beatitudes

- 1) Jesus the subversive champion of social justice for the poor and downtrodden at the eastern fringes of the Roman Empire. (Jesus who drives the money changers out of the Temple, challenging the religious authorities and disturbing the peace.)
- 2) Jesus as the champion of a new individuality that finds integrity in people from all walks of life (Jesus who calls each of us with the same words, “Follow me.”)
- 3) Jesus the Jewish Messiah for the apocalyptic end times (Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, the only door to the Father).

So much depends on how we read the text, which we'll do momentarily—which words do we choose to emphasize and where do we break up the sentence. Let us consider four of the nine Beatitudes in this light, the four that to my mind are the most fruitful for constructing a kind of political Jesus. The very first Beatitude reads: ³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Is this the voice of a revolutionary champion calling for the poor and downtrodden to rise up against their oppressors, or is this the voice that says “hang on and bear it a little longer, because your perseverance will be rewarded in Heaven”? Is it only the materially poor who are blessed, or also the spiritually poor? Consider

similarly the blessing on those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and are assured that they will be filled. Is Jesus addressing specifically the physically hungry and thirsty, or also those with a more ephemeral spiritual hunger and thirst for righteousness? And also consider with me the blessing on those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake and are promised the Kingdom of Heaven. If one is punished or persecuted for some mischief or misconduct, they will not find sympathy here, but is it only those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake who will be blessed in this way, or is it also those who are persecuted out of no fault of their own? And also please consider the Beatitude that reads, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account, for great is your reward in Heaven." Is it the case that all who are reviled and persecuted, and all those against whom false testimony is given will be rewarded, or only those who are abused in this way on Jesus' account, and again what does it mean to be told that one's reward will be great in Heaven? Is Jesus here too saying, just hang on a little longer, or is he saying why wait, what the heck, what do you have to lose by going for it now?

Each of these interpretations, and indeed many more, finds support in the Sermon on the Mount, and much of what we know as Jesus' social gospel has roots in these verses and their analogous verses in Luke. Part of what is so confounding is the words that are tacked on to the end of each of the Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor *in spirit*; Blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*; Blessed are those who are persecuted *for righteousness sake*; Blessed are you when you are reviled, persecuted and lied about *on my account*. These words—these addenda—accomplish at least three things. First, they elevate the spiritual plain—the spiritual dimension of this sermon—to at least the same level as the material. Second, if there were informants loyal to Rome or the Pharisees, they would have trouble pinning a charge of sedition on Jesus if they were to quote him accurately. And third, if we imagine Jesus speaking with his disciples as the primary audience in this original setting, then the disciples would have been reassured to know that this message is for them and not just for those who have been or are poor, hungry, thirsty or persecuted, none of which would yet apply to the disciples gathered around Jesus at the time. We can likewise take heart in this last point, since the message of the Beatitudes is for you, for me, for everyone: indeed it's possible for good Christians to find different Jesus's in the Gospels and perhaps especially in the Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount, but the point is that there's only one Lord.

I've been focussing this far on what might be called the political or socio-economic dimension of the Beatitudes, but let's go back and look briefly at a handful of other points that should not be allowed to escape our attention this morning. We immediately notice Jesus going up the mountain upon seeing the crowds. In a separate context I recently had cause to reflect on the Transfiguration, which is another mountaintop experience though far more intimate than this one; and of course Moses brings the Law down from another mountain.

After Jesus sits down, the disciples—as if waiting puzzled for the situation to clarify—come to him, which begs the question of who is the immediate audience, the disciples or the crowds? My hunch is that it's the disciples, because to me it would make more sense to put the crowd on the mountain and to speak standing if they were the intended hearers, but Jesus instead sits, which is traditionally how a rabbi would teach his congregation. Nonetheless it seems that both Jesus and Matthew present this sermon on the mount as a standard for all Christians to aspire to.

In fact, perhaps I should have begun this morning with the word “blessed”—sometimes translated “happy”—which appears as the first word of the nine Beatitudes. It's a subtle word, and the definition that I like most speaks of it as “the ultimate well-being and distinctive spiritual joy of those who share in the Kingdom of God.”

We have observed how the verses of the Beatitudes have this capacity to confound and challenge, but notice also their unmistakable divine power and authority. These are words that change hearts, minds and lives. Again, thus far I've been focusing on how certain phrases might be addressed to specific audiences, but let's now turn to the five Beatitudes that to me are addressed unambiguously to all of us with nary a trace of socio-political meaning:

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

If you're familiar with this congregation, then you know that we've lost some real pillars of the faith, most recently our dear Laurenda Daniels. When preparing these remarks I wanted to print out a version for Laurenda who didn't hear well, and it still feels as if there's an empty chair where she would sit. Heroes of the faith like Laurenda are precious, and we do indeed miss

them very much, but we also feel God's comforting hand on our shoulder as we soldier on.

⁵"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

This to me is Jesus at his most mystical, his most Asian, where he speaks about the power of softness and yielding—Gandhi understood this; Daoism teaches the same message; and in a violent world we too easily lose sight of this most basic truth.

⁷"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Grace is when we get something good that we didn't really deserve, and mercy is when we escape something like punishment that we in fact thoroughly deserve. But note how Jesus asserts the reciprocal nature of mercy: those who are merciful will be blessed with mercy in return—what goes around in this case comes around.

⁸"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Can we see God and live? What does it mean to be pure in heart? I'd love to see God, but I don't think I'm quite there to being pure in heart. Maybe this is what happens when one reaches the end of one's days? A nice thought—something to think about and perhaps even look forward to.

⁹"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Have you ever made peace between two warring parties? I don't want to discourage anyone from being a peacemaker, but my experience has been that whenever I've been successful in this, the warring parties want nothing to do with me anymore because I remind them of a very unpleasant memory. Ouch! But take comfort in knowing that your selfless gift of reconciliation will contribute to your being regarded as a true child of God.

And let's return one more time by way of conclusion to: ¹¹"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

I may be overly sensitive about this, but friends there is something difficult about being a Christian in the academy. I think everyone who knows me here at UBC knows where I am on a Sunday morning, and frankly this has not endeared me to some people. What I'd like you to think about is the young people in Food & Faith, the younger members of our congregation and community. We old-timers have had some practice being Christians in the world—this weirdly bilingual and bicultural existence that has devolved upon us—but let's not forget how difficult it was for us to learn this. We have lots to talk about with our younger members, lots to *learn from each other!*

Well, I think that's about enough for one Sunday morning. If this were class, I'd now ask if there were any questions, but let's follow custom and save questions for later. Amen