



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON – 4TH EPIPHANY
MATTHEW 5:1-12 & MICAH 6:1-8
JANUARY 29, 2023
“BLESSED ARE YOU WHO DO”

Last fall I visited the country of Austria, including a day in the city of Salzburg - the birthplace of composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – considered one of the greatest of all. It recalled for me the 1984 Academy Award winning film “Amadeus” - a fictionalized account of his life, told through the perspective of another composer, Antonio Salieri. Salieri was a devout Catholic – he revered Mozart the composer but loathed Mozart the man for his many personal excesses.

The film depicts Salieri near the end of his life confessing to the murder of Mozart, whose death at the age of 35 is still considered mysterious. Salieri was tormented in life by his own musical “mediocrity” compared to the brilliance of Mozart. By life’s end he is confined to an asylum. His priest is not sure he is making a genuine confession or offering up the rants of a madman. The film closes with the laughter of Mozart ringing in the air as Salieri is wheeled down the halls of the asylum strangely “absolving” or perhaps “blessing” the weaknesses, and “mediocrities” of his fellow patients.

As his ministry begins, Jesus blesses people, but the object of his blessings strikes many as strange. They’re not directed at people’s “inadequacies” by any means, but he is saying people in the throes of difficulty are blessed. The Sermon on the Mount lays out the main themes of Jesus’ message. These “blessings” however, linked as they are to certain conditions or attitudes of life, are not commands or advice on how to live. God followers ought to hunger and thirst for righteousness, be humble not proud, merciful not vengeful, reconcilers not dividers, and fill our hearts with good thoughts, not sinful ones.

The trouble with receiving these sayings as commands lies not in their undisputed virtuousness but the fact that even if we do strive for and attain them, they don’t always result in what apparently Jesus promises. Mourners often go uncomforted, it can hardly be said the meek or timid control much of this world’s goods, mercy on our part is often taken advantage of, attempts at peacemaking exploited as signs of weakness, and many a follower of Christ take – unfilled, their hunger for righteousness to their grave.

These sayings are not an admonition of how to behave better. Rather Jesus is announcing the beginning, but just the beginning of the kingdom of heaven, and that because of His righteousness, His peacemaking between God and sinful humanity, His mercy, the persecution He endures because of His thirst for righteousness and His being scorned by his enemies, those who encounter likewise...are blessed – they have “the kingdom”. In the film “Amadeus”, Antonio Salieri “blesses” the most unlikely of folks – people suffering greatly in body, mind and spirit – and recall that in those days the mentally ill were “cast-offs”, feared, loathed, and often regarded as accursed by God for their maladies. Salieri blesses their “inadequacies” because he so intensely feels them. He knows in his own soul and mind what they feel.

As Jesus lays out the core of his entire message in Matthew 5 - he is saying that God the Father, incarnate in Jesus the Son, has a human heart and feels what we feel. Ever feel worn down by this world wondering if you'll ever get the upper hand on it- are you ever "poor in spirit" - so was Jesus. Have you ever felt the ache in your chest called grief - so did Jesus. Do you ever tire of seeing a world that, to put it mildly is "out of whack" and seems to continually invent ways to be callous, deceitful, greedy - so did Jesus. Would you like to make peace with someone yet between you and them is something of a wall that makes them impervious to or suspicious of your attempts - so did Jesus.

The sermon on the Mount is an announcement to the world - not an analysis of it. It announces something God initiated and will bring to fulness in the day of Jesus Christ. It is good news - "gospel" - and therefore can only be believed and hoped for because it is the assurance of things unseen. The world and it's people don't act or think like this. Jesus is saying if you do - you are in good shape. In stark contrast to what composer Antonio Salieri did - bless people's "inadequacies" - Jesus blesses that which makes someone more Christ-like than they could ever imagine. Blessed he said, are you whose experience of this world is like unto mine.

Old Testament lesson from Micah begins "*Hear what the Lord says.*" They too are an announcement of sorts - the announcement in this case being that God has a bone to pick with Israel and is pining for a response. "*Plead your case...tell your side of the story...speak up so I and all the world can hear.*"

God's "case" is a recalling of what he has done in the past - in this case the Exodus from Egypt. Pretty good case I might add! Israel, if it were to have made one, likely would have been the usual - look at what we do for you...look at what we put in the offering plate! It affords them little, and at this we'd be tempted to say... *oh, this ought to be good - now God's gonna lay it on thick.* Until he doesn't that is. In exchange for his loving kindness to them, God had no plans to up the call for sacrifices - that probably would have done little good anyway based on the attitude Israel has toward existing ones.

So, God pivots and says simply...*No, from now on I want you to...hunger and thirst for righteousness...give kindness a try...and be humble,* which for sinners rescued by grace shouldn't be that difficult. And that was that. End of announcement. All the anticipated sound and fury reduced to practically a whisper. Then again, maybe it was all a prelude to "*the announcement*", the one delivered in person, promises made by the promise keeper...who can be believed when he adds..."blessed are you who do." AMEN