

This past week we gathered with friends and family to give thanks for the many blessings God has given us. I felt like Thanksgiving began for me a few weeks prior to the holiday itself. I was able to enjoy a few days of retreat in the Smoky Mountains, simply slowing down, watching the radiant ambers, golds, and crimson hues along the mountainside.

When I returned from my mountain retreat, I still had vacation time set aside to celebrate the 4th birthday of one Colin King. Colin requested a mountain experience himself, wanting a hike with dad on his birthday. So we went to the lesser mountain that is Concord Park, but no easy slope for a 4 year old. Per Colin's request we went farther than we've ever hiked. Halfway through I asked him if his legs were getting tired. He said, 'No, four year old legs don't get tired.' Seems accurate.

So I had a week between mountains, so to speak. What I didn't recognize when I read the Gospel lesson for this Sunday was the mountain backdrop to Jesus' famous words concerning the least of these. Even more I hadn't seen Jesus' Kingdom message connected by two mountains. More on that in a moment.

For three weeks now we've been hearing three segments of a single sermon—Jesus' final words on the Kingdom of God before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. I did not realize that when we concluded our series on the Christian virtues that the lectionary would lead us into an unofficial series on judgment and the end of time. Affirming the authority of Scripture is noble, but its not always convenient or easy.

Yet these are the parables and teachings of our Lord, words that he speaks *privately* to his twelve disciples. Everything Jesus said was a response to this single question from his disciples: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age¹?"

And where was the Lord and his disciples when that question and its accompanying sermon given? The Mount of Olives.

For words so beautiful; words so challenging; words so familiar and inspiring, I have never noticed *when* and *where* they were spoken. Where

were they spoken? The Mount of Olives. *When* were they spoken? In Matthew's story of Jesus, these are Jesus' final words on the Kingdom of God before his death. For good reason, we treat final words with greater significance.

Thinking on Jesus' final words about the Kingdom of God on the Mount of Olives concerning 'the least of these'—the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the grieving, the imprisoned—reminds me how Jesus *began* teaching the Kingdom in Matthew's story.

When Jesus spoke his *first* words about the Kingdom of God, he invited his disciples to come and follow him and where does Jesus lead them? To a mountain. Matthew 5.1: "Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him."

And Jesus spoke his *first* words on the Kingdom of God, sitting among his disciples, saying:

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

4 *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

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

6 *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

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

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

9 *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

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

11 *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

From the Mount of Beatitudes to the Mount of Olives; from the opening verse to the final verse of Jesus' Kingdom poem; the melody is mercy. Disciples of this Kingdom are the King's emissaries of blessing in this broken world.

Let us tell another truth about these two Kingdom sermons—faithfulness seems impossible. On the Mount of Beatitudes, once you get past the words of blessing, you run into Jesus' Kingdom words that humble every disciple—words on anger, lust, honesty, integrity, selflessness, loving enemies, overcoming evil with good. How can such things be? //

Back to the Mount of Olives. Even the most tireless Christian, anointed with the spiritual gift of mercy, cannot fulfill this mountain of a calling *by himself/herself* to visit the sick, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, serve the thirsty, welcome the stranger. For 39 years I've read Jesus' words with American eyes—as a call upon the individual disciple. If you read his words that way, his words will crush you. This can sound like the Kingdom path is a divine path to burnout. It's a good thing Jesus meant 'you' in a different way.

Throughout this Gospel passage, in the original Greek translation 'you' is plural. Translated to Appalachian: y'all. In our dialect, it sounds like, "I was a stranger and y'all welcomed me." These are the Lord's words to *us*. And I am a member of *us*. I can neither assume someone else is going to do the tough work, nor believe that unless I do it all, it won't get done. /

Jesus speaks these words on the Mount of Olives. You know what else will happen on the Mount of Olives? Jesus will ascend into heaven. And when he ascends into heaven, his Holy Spirit descends, blessing his disciples—y'all—with many and varied gifts. And our many and varied gifts can cover a lot more ground than I can alone. Compare the needs Jesus mentions in Matthew 25 with the gifts of the Spirit Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 12. The gifts of the Holy Spirit poured over the Church are given to serve the least of these in whom Christ dwells. /

I need good stories to reorient my mind and heart about how I am part of us; how together *we* are emissaries of the King to serve the least, the last, the lost.

St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, tells the story of the early church martyr,

St Lawrence, who lived in an age of Roman persecution under the emperor Valerian. St Lawrence served as a deacon in his church and Roman authorities raided the church, demanding the Christians surrender all their treasure to the Empire. St Lawrence promised that he would present their treasures to the Empire the next day.

On the following day, St Lawrence gathered the poor of his church together. When Roman officials met St Lawrence demanding the church's treasure, St Lawrence pointed to the poor and said, "These are the treasures of the Church." /

St Lawrence wasn't only speaking a profound conviction concerning the poor. His church had literally distributed their treasures among their members with greatest need. Instead of giving alms elsewhere, they took care of their own to follow the commands of Jesus. The persecuting Romans couldn't seize their gold because it had already been used to feed and clothe their poor members. As Ambrose said, "What greater treasures has Christ than those in whom He says He Himself lives?"²

Speaking of St Ambrose, he was inspired in his own day that his churches love 'the least of these' with whom Christ identified. Human trafficking was a pervasive evil then as it is today, though in Ambrose's day the slave trade occurred in the public square. Ambrose believed that his churches ought to commit their full resources to redeem the captives in his diocese. For Ambrose, literally *all* the church's resources were eligible to fulfill Jesus' command to serve the least of these.

Ambrose—the Bishop of Milan—decided that the gold chalice—the communion cup—had substantial weight to free more captives *if they melted the chalice to pure gold*. Other churches criticized Ambrose for the decision. But Ambrose was unmoved in his belief that, 'it was far better to preserve living vessels than gold ones. The sacraments don't require gold, because they can't be bought with gold. The glory of the sacraments is the redemption of captives.'³

I see my calling within this ancient family of which I'm a member—I want to have the heart of St Ambrose. I want to see treasure like St Lawrence did. But to have that heart, to gain that vision, I need to die. /

You see there's another mountain in the background of Jesus' final Kingdom words. Not the Mount of Beatitudes or the Mount of Olives, but Mount Calvary. For that is where Jesus goes after he proclaims his final Kingdom words. You see, Jesus calls his disciples to live like sheep under his guidance as the Good Shepherd, yet he will become the *scapegoat* for Israel and all humanity.

When I collapse under the weight of the Sermon on the Mount; when I fail to show love to the least of these; still more when we fail as his people to follow his ways, Jesus accepts the judgment that was ours. That is the staggering grace in this unexpected series on judgment. Christ the King takes upon himself not just *my* judgment, but the judgment upon Israel, and the judgment on the nations. On Mount Calvary, Jesus dies as a scapegoat so we can become a new creation, a new people in Him, the sheep of his pasture.

It's not just remembering the plural 'you' that helps me faithfully serve the least of these, it's remembering that, just like St Matthew, St Ambrose, St Lawrence, and 2,000 years of Christians since, we read these words on the other side of Mount Calvary. For on the other side of Mount Calvary is resurrection, where Christ the King conquers death. On the other side of Mount Calvary is Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit changes my heart of stone into a heart of flesh so I can see the image of God in a man who is hungry, a child who thirsts, a woman longing for justice, a stranger seeking a family, a captive seeking freedom.

And King Jesus gave me his Holy Spirit so he could convict me when my life becomes all about me. The Holy Spirit comes to awaken my heart when I'm much too concerned about my personal comfort and convenience; when my schedule is arranged only for my needs.

I'm learning the best beginning for confession is to say to the Lord, 'I

have loved myself too much.’ And then I can reflect on how that love has cut off the least of these whom Jesus loves. But when I confess my sins with my family, when we confess our sins *as his church*, we receive Jesus’ words of forgiveness as his Kingdom people. Together we begin again. /

Today we come to the end of the Christian year. Next Sunday we begin a new Christian year on the first Sunday of Advent. Two weeks ago in the Smoky Mountains, I read these words from the Anglican preacher, Austin Farrer, which he spoke on the final Sunday of the church year:

“It’s the end of the Church year, and we may well do some self-examination and see how we have spent our time and how we have served our Creator. We shall find that all is to be begun again—who can say we have advanced [in faith]? But we must be patient. God shapes us by his providence and by our very failures, if we will keep looking to him. He knows that the beginnings he has made with us are not in vain. For it is his good pleasure to give us the Kingdom⁴.”

So forgetting what is past, let us begin again pursuing the King and his Kingdom on this side of Mount Calvary; feeding the hungry, serving the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick—*together—all in the Name of the King who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹ Matthew 24.3

² St. Ambrose, *On the Duties of the Clergy*, II, 140-141.

³ *Ibid.*, 136-138.

⁴ Austin Farrer, *The Essential Sermons*, 166.