

Year A, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 29, 2017  
The Rev. Fred Devall

Like most good preachers, Jesus had a go-to sermon, or what a politician might call a stump-speech. Such an oration would hit upon key themes that were near and dear to the preacher's heart. I often wonder how many dozens if not hundreds of times Jesus gave some version of his go-to address that we now call the Sermon on the Mount? It's an interesting composition as we now find it in Matthew's Gospel. It begins with the Beatitudes, flows into practical application of the ideals laid out in the opening sentiments, and concludes with a famous parable about the man who built his house on the rock. This morning we hear the opening words of Matthew chapter 5. How often have we heard these words but left them on the page? In other words, have we been guilty of loving the poetry without living the words? Being a Christian is hard business and it requires a lot of us if we are truly to grow in the faith. Believe me, there is nothing easy about the new life of grace to which Jesus calls us, but it is there, following us, almost haunting us and it demands that we at least hold it and acknowledge it.

The Beatitudes, the blessings, for that is what beatitudes means, are the opening poetic ideals that Jesus uses as the introduction for his famous Sermon on the Mount. He speaks of blessings upon those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These folks are generally not appreciated in our society and are generally viewed as troublemakers if not outright threats to the *status quo*. Society is a bit more accepting of the merciful (if that mercy is directed at them or someone they love), the peacemakers (when we've grown weary of war), and the persecuted (if someone other than us is doing the persecuting). The ones who are reviled and persecuted for following Jesus are generally admired if they do it somewhere else and are generally criticized if their words are directed at us or in the direction of a position we support.

Bishop Paul Jones was leading the Diocese of Utah beginning in 1914. Under his leadership "he did much to expand the Church's mission stations and to strengthen diocesan institutions. At the same time he spoke openly about his opposition to the war. With the United States entry into the war, the Bishop of Utah's views became increasingly controversial...In 1917, Bishop Jones expressed his belief that 'war is unchristian,' for which he was attacked with banner headlines in the Utah press. Investigated by a commission of the House of Bishops, the report recommended that 'The Bishop of Utah ought to resign his office,' thus rejecting Paul Jones' right to object to war on grounds of faith and conscience." (Lesser Feasts and Fasts, 1994, page 348). Jones always struck me as someone who made a good stab at trying to internalize the teachings of Jesus. Based on verses 11-12, he must have been an extraordinarily blessed man, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." I am not a pacifist, but I have great respect for people who arrive at that conclusion. Most pacifists arrive at that place after exhaustive study and prayer. It is not taken lightly and falls within the norm for Christians. How then did our own House of Bishops censure a bishop for arriving at a legitimate Christian

position? Perhaps this was one of those times when the strong pressure of the Wilson administration and the related propaganda worked on most people, but not all; not Jones.

Prophets are reviled for their direct words, but I believe they are hated for the embarrassment they conjure up in ourselves when we realize the gap between the words of Jesus and the lives we live. The Bible is all well and good when it sits on the shelf and is consulted when convenient, but take those words and remind people that as baptized Christians we are meant to act on these words of Jesus, well, I venture to say the Beatitudes will take on a whole new meaning for you.

The poet Wendell Berry took a stab at writing a novel and did a pretty good job in the work known as *Jayber Crow*. The subtitle reads, "The life story of Jayber Crow, barber of the Port William Membership as written by himself." In autobiographical form, we hear a Christian layperson trying to make his way in the world. In one scene, Jayber is at his station cutting hair on a typical Saturday. It was in the late 1960's and the Vietnam War was full on. The antagonist in the scene is Troy, a hard driving farmer who runs roughshod over land and people. "Once Jimmy was gone, Troy realized how much he had depended upon his son in the farming operation. Troy missed him, thought better of him, and excused his faults. In town he reported on his travels and bragged on his accomplishments.

Troy also became a fierce partisan of the army and government's war policy. The war protesters had started making a stir, and the talk in my shop ran pretty much against them. Troy hated them. As his way was, he loved hearing himself say bad things about them.

One Saturday evening, while Troy was waiting his turn in the chair, the subject was started and Troy said...'They ought to round up every one of them sons of guns and put them right in front of the damned communists, and then whoever killed who, it would be all to the good.

There was a little pause after that. Nobody wanted to try to top it...

It was hard to do, but I quit cutting hair and looked at Troy. I said, 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you.'

Troy jerked his head up and widened his eyes at me. 'Where did you get that garbage?'

I said, 'Jesus Christ.'

And Troy said, 'Oh.'

It would have been a great moment in the history of Christianity, except that I did not love Troy" (pages 286-87).

Sometimes two people read the same reading from scripture, pray over the passage, and then arrive at different positions. This need not be the basis for division or the breaking of a

relationship. When we come to the altar, be reminded that the Eucharist is the ultimate symbol of our Christian unity. Different people with different conclusions love Jesus and are loved by Jesus just as much as the next. *Amen.*