

Epiphany – Ordinary Time

Glimpses of the Kin-dom

Ordinary time has never struck the imagination of many preachers and worship teams. And yes, it refers to the ordinal or the counting of the weeks of the liturgical year, not what it sounds like to our western ears: ordinary. Yet we can play with the word that it sounds like and explore what it is like to live an ordinary life as a part of the kin-dom of God; in other words, nothing like ordinary!

We are counting the weeks after Epiphany and attempting to get a glimpse of what life as the people of God might be like. We consider some of the most famous passages of scripture to help us shape a vision of the life we are called to live—not just a special, rise-to-the-occasion kind of life, but an everyday life, an ordinary life that isn't ordinary. Because we believe that followers of Christ who live their faith day by day are anything but ordinary. They stand out; they become models and mentors; they are examples of what life is all about.

At least that is our hope and our belief: that our lives represent the kin-dom of God. We are the evidence that our faith is true and our God is at work in the world. In other words, we are now the epiphany, the light shining forth for the world to see. And of course, we will fail from time to time. But how we deal with failure is also a sign of that presence and glimpse of the kin-dom. So, this ordinary time is extra-ordinary in the living of it. Let us embrace the call with grace and with joy.

Baptism of the Lord – “The Water’s Fine”

January 8, 2023

[Matthew 3:13-17](#)

Color: White

PLANNING NOTES

The Baptism of the Lord is a perfect time to remind ourselves of the commitment to living a life of grace and hope outwardly. If you observed Epiphany Sunday last week, then this week follows in the usual pattern. If you focused on New Year’s last week and saved the Epiphany recognition for this week, then you can combine the two. It is possible to let the star and the baptism both speak of the revealing of the light of Christ to the world. Covenant and baptism renewal are both powerful ways to launch a new year for the faithful. If the covenant prayer was used last week, then this week let the baptism renewal vows be reminders of that promise in different words.

This series is designed to help us see the kin-dom of God lived out in concrete ways within the body of Christ. So, this week is the promise to be that example, to claim that grace and gift, and to embrace the responsibility of being the church in the world right now. The kin-dom is not a someday thing; it is a today thing and we are committing ourselves to that vision right here and right now. Actually, we’ve already done that. All baptized and confirmed members of The United Methodist Church have already made that promise and are living into that grace. This is just a reminder, a revival of sorts, a re-energizing of the community of faith for another calendar year.

So, worship team, how will you encourage members to re-up their commitment to Christ? What forms will that recommitment take in the order of worship? Is this an altar call? A shared covenant prayer? Are people coming forward, writing something down, receiving a reminder card? What tools will you use this week to help worshipers understand and seize the opportunity before them? Let us not miss this moment.

But some might be thinking, “What about those who haven’t yet made this commitment, who aren’t baptized in the faith, who might be just a guest or visitor? How do we make sure that they don’t feel left out or pushed aside?” A great question, and just by asking it, you are already aware that provision must be

made for those who might not consider themselves a part of the body already. Everything that is done for members is done invitationally. There is always the opportunity for someone to be making a first-time commitment in this act. Maybe the covenant prayer stirs up a desire to go deeper, to know more. Maybe the baptism vows remembered evoke a desire to learn more or to ask questions or even to make a new commitment. What next steps can you offer in this moment so that everyone feels included and invited to be a part of the fellowship? You're announcing that everyone should come on in; the water's fine!

PREACHING NOTES

Have you ever known a polar bear? I don't mean the real bear type bear. I mean those nutcases who decide that the best way to celebrate the new year is by finding a semi-ice-covered body of water and jumping in. There must be some sort of sanity gene missing from these folks. I have even read of mishaps taking place during this annual polar bear swim: heart attacks, frostbite, chilblains - whatever those are. Yet, they keep doing it. Not only that, but they seem evangelistic about it. They talk about what a wonderful experience it is; they bubble over with enthusiasm; they invite folks to join them in their madness: "Come on in; the water's fine!"

I'm always suspicious when someone tells me that. Even in the heat of summer, when a friend is swimming in a pool or lake and tells me not to worry, the water's fine, I don't trust him. I don't like the chill of plunging into icy water. Oh, it can be refreshing when you are sweating like crazy, and the air temperature hits three digits. But most of the time, I'm reluctant. I don't like to shiver. I don't like to lose the feeling in my toes.

At the same time, I don't like being left out. When it looks like folks are having fun and I'm standing on the shore watching, my desire to join in the party overrides my fear of freezing, and I'll jump in too. Or wade in. Slowly. But I'll get there eventually.

John stood in the waters of the Jordan River and shouted out, "Come on in; the water's fine." And some joined him, and others stood on the shore. He had a

word or two for those on the shore, but that is a different passage. Today, we look at one who took him up on the invitation and joined him in the waters.

There are just a whole lot of issues that grow out of this little gospel moment, and I can't pretend to deal with them all here. We know how seriously the church takes these things by the level of debate surrounding baptism issues. First of all, there is the infant versus believer baptism; then there is the methodological question, followed by the liturgical issues (such as do you invoke the whole Trinity or simply baptize in the name of Jesus?). All of these matters have been hotly debated for centuries and are no closer to resolution than they were at the beginning.

And don't look for me to resolve them all here either! I am a United Methodist and hold to the validity of infant baptism, but accept those who choose believer's baptism as well. I am a United Methodist and recognize that our tradition is overwhelmingly weighted toward sprinkling, but have taken baptismal candidates to pools and rivers and fonts from neighboring congregations for immersion baptism. I use the liturgy our church provides that emphasizes the Trinity (in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit) but also acknowledge that our understanding of the sacrament as a whole comes from Jesus directly.

And I can find meaning in all of it. I can find justification for baptizing in a variety of ways, in a variety of settings, with a variety of words. But there is one dimension that has to be present, in my way of thinking.

When Jesus climbed down the bank into the river, John was shocked. How he knew who Jesus was, we aren't told. Maybe it is something from their shared family history that gave John the clue as to who was standing in front of him. Maybe it was a whisper from the Spirit in John's ear as Jesus approached and what he heard made him think that something was wrong in the way this scene was playing out. Maybe there is just something about the face of Jesus that caused fishermen to leave their nets and broken people to reach out in hope and powerful people to tremble in their boots and this wild man from the desert to want to fall to his knees and be blessed instead of attempting to confer a blessing. We don't know what happened to cause John to say what he said. Or caused Matthew to record what he said. But something did. Some sense of what was

right and what was wrong. And John's sense of what was right was that Jesus should be the one blessing, should be the one baptizing.

Yet, Jesus says, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). Let it be so for now? What does that mean? Let's go through the motions? Let's pretend for now? And what is this righteousness that Jesus is trying to fulfill?

The truth is, we don't really know what this means. We have some guesses, and some are more certain than others. But we don't really know. What makes sense to me is that Jesus is saying, "I want to join the party. I want to be seen joining the party. I want my ministry, my life, my witness to be one about becoming a part of the body, about joining up with the kingdom of God."

John's hesitation has to do with, some say, his understanding of baptism being one of repentance, of forgiveness of sins. And this man had no need to have sins forgiven. So, why would he consent to this baptism? Maybe Jesus' view of what was happening was larger. Maybe John, and most of us, think of repentance as turning away. When we repent, we turn away from our sins, our life of sin. We are sorry for what had gone on before; we are sorry for what we had done before and we are pledging to not engage in those behaviors again. That is how we understand repentance.

But what if Jesus understood repentance to be primarily a turning toward? What if the gesture that Jesus was making was one of inclusion or acceptance or entrance? This was a beginning moment for the ministry that Jesus would perform. This was a sign that something new was about to be launched. And this new thing was nothing less than the kingdom of God, nothing less than a new way of living in community.

Righteousness refers to being faithful to relationships. You cannot be righteous all by yourself. You are righteous with God and righteous with one another.

Righteousness implies a relationship. The necessary requirement for baptism in The United Methodist Church is the community. Baptism is a corporate act; it is almost always done as a part of worship. And when in extreme cases it is not a part of a regular worship service, then the community must be represented. Baptism is an entrance into the fellowship of believers; it is a joining up with the body. Once you have been baptized, you are never alone. There is always a family

around you. You have joined something larger than yourself, which is sometimes startling, but always worthwhile.

Come on in; the water's fine.

Second Sunday after the Epiphany – “Not Lacking”

January 15, 2023, MLK Day

[1 Corinthians 1:1-9](#), [Psalm 40:1-11](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

Our text this week includes Paul’s assertion that the church has everything it needs to be the church. That’s an amazing and powerful statement of faith. Too often, we spend time wishing – wishing we had more people or more resources or more volunteers or more activity. But what if, instead, we were simply thankful? Let’s be thankful for the gifts we have, for the people we have, for how they give of themselves and their resources and give thanks for the mission and witness that we are able to do week by week. Of course, we want to encourage more. But not because we are lacking. No, we encourage more because we don’t want anyone to miss out on the joy of being the body of Christ, the joy of serving, the joy of worship. We come from an attitude of abundance and not scarcity.

Psalm 40 could be used as a reminder that even when life is difficult, God is good. Sometimes we experience that abundant grace in surprising or even miraculous ways, but most of the time it comes through the generosity and caring of the community of faith around us. We are supported by one another. We are lifted up and rescued by one another.

This might be a time of testimony where stories of rescue can be shared, and gratitude offered for the times when you might have been pulled from “a desolate pit” by the kindness of a neighbor. Maybe it seems simple now, but it is a glimpse of the kin-dom at work among us. Let the stories be told of how gifts were used, gifts of hospitality and of prayer, gifts of service and leadership and teaching to give hope and knowledge and comfort. Maybe you could celebrate a specific area of ministry in the life of the church. Like Paul, you are claiming that we are not lacking in any spiritual gift and that Christ is at work among you, sustaining and strengthening. What a joy to be a part of a loving church.

How would you represent some of the gifts of the community in a visual way, as a worship center in the front of the congregation? What items might you include that speak of the abundance of grace within your church? What pictures might you show, and what events might you feature?

Let your songs be songs of praise and thanksgiving for all God has given, and for the call to be a part of this fellowship. Let your prayers be full of gratitude for service rendered, even as you acknowledge the needs all around you in your community and world.

This is also **Human Relations Sunday**, as we remember that we are called to ***See All the People***. Does our church reflect the wider community around you? If not, how do you offer your gifts to the wider community? How do you include and invite?

We also remember the call of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on this weekend. His witness and call remind us that the work of antiracism and civil rights is not yet done, and we need to be engaged in the transforming work of the gospel, even in our neighborhoods. Even here, we come not from fear or from lack, but from an abundance of grace that calls us into action to be a part of the creation of beloved community in which everyone is welcome, and everyone is honored. Let us celebrate the church we are and we are becoming.

PREACHING NOTES

My son, Rhys, was finally old enough to go off on his first ever youth ski trip one winter weekend. We were all a little nervous, mixed in with excitement for him. I couldn't wait to hear how it all went. But we were a bit startled the first morning of the trip when the phone rang, and it turned out to be Rhys. How many frightening thoughts can you think in the space of a heartbeat? Lots and lots.

It turned out to be nothing. Well, not nothing. He needed some money. There was an opportunity for him to take a skiing lesson there on the slopes, and he wanted permission to spend the money to sign up. My wife calculated that the expense of the lesson was smaller than a trip to the emergency room, so we gave permission.

He wanted to learn how to do what he was doing. Kind of amazing when you think about it. We never even considered trying to find a place for some lessons before he went. That would make the most sense, don't you think? We like to know what we are doing before we do it. We like to feel well-versed, comfortable in our doing.

If only I knew more, we might think, if only I had more. If I were more like my preacher, or my teacher, or my mentor or some other hero of the faith, then I could do great things for God. We look this weekend to the great orator and civil rights hero that was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. What kind of nation would we be, what kind of church, if we learned from his example of faith and life?

As it is, I'm still learning. I'm still in process. Don't expect much because I don't have much. Or don't expect much because I am not so much.

Does any of that sound like you? I have to confess that at times, I can sound like that. I can sound as though my lack of accomplishments is due to some external thing that I am missing. Some knowledge, some skill, some resource - if I just had that, then all sorts of wonderful things could happen. As it is, not much.

Oddly enough, the biblical passage for this week was not written to deal with this attitude. If anything, it was trying to deal with the opposite problem. Yes, in one of those mysterious, God kind of ways, it meets us where we are.

The problem in Corinth that brought about Paul's letter was not a lack of confidence. If anything, it was the opposite. There was a group of Christians in the church at Corinth who considered themselves better than the average believer. They believed that their ability to speak in tongues was a signal that they were more equipped, more favored, more special than those whose gifts were more mundane.

They were even of the opinion that they really had to listen to no one but themselves. That is why Paul begins by stressing his credentials. Paul, "called to be an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." It's hard to argue with a title like that. Hard to hold the opinion that this one has nothing to teach you. And then he also reminds them of their call, which is twofold. First, they were "called to be saints." You would think that this is the kind of talk that would only add to their arrogance. How many of us look forward to having St. in front of our names someday? Not many, I would suspect.

Yet for Paul, the word *Saint* meant someone who recognizes the need for a savior. A saint is one who has said yes to Jesus Christ. It carried no honor except the honor of the one who called. It made no guarantee that the behavior of this person is exemplary. A saint was someone beholden to God through Jesus Christ.

Beholden is a wonderful word we don't use any more. But it conveys images of being wrapped up as well as belonging. If we are beholden to God, then it is God who shows through more than us because we are wrapped up in that presence, that light. The good things that we do, the bright face that we show is the face of God shining through us, not our own visage, which might not be so holy.

Paul was reminding the Corinthians that they belonged to God and was asking them to examine their behavior to see if they still fit that description. When you become arrogant, you move the self to the center and anything else has to make way. But if God is supposed to be the center, then arrogance has no place in the community of faith.

The second thing that Paul wanted to remind the Corinthians is that they were a part of something larger than themselves. He called them saints "together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." Jesus isn't the exclusive property of those who seek to define him in specific ways. The Corinthians had remade Christ in their image, and Paul was trying to help them take a larger view. You are a part of something bigger than your eyes and bigger than your imagination. All those who in every place - who can comprehend something on that scale? It was a way of putting things in perspective before he even got to the meat of the letter.

Both of these points are a part of King's legacy to the church. A reminder, first of all that we are called to live not by our own wisdom, not by our own preferences and prejudices, but by the call of God, the vision of the kin-dom that defines our hopes and prayers and service. And that we are in this together. It is not just me or my church, my circle, the ones like me, the ones I get along with. No, our vision is always bigger, always for inclusion, always for beloved community. That is how we honor the memory of this servant of God who became the conscience of a nation for a brief time, and is needed again today.

But the problem of the Corinthians that brought forth this letter from Paul: their arrogance seems alien to our experience. We almost laugh at the idea. Who would ever proclaim themselves "super-Christian"? It seems to us that the very act of doing so would be evidence that there was still a lot to learn. No, our inclination is to want to step to the background or to sit on the sidelines. To us, Paul has another word. Well, he has the same word first. We too are saints; we

too are part of something bigger than ourselves. But for us, it is a way to build us up and not to knock us down. It is a way to encourage us, I believe.

Paul tells us, particularly those of us who don't think we measure up, that we have been enriched. Not that we will be or we could be or we might be, but that we have been. Not only that, he goes on to say that we are not lacking in any spiritual gift. We have everything we need to be the church that we are called to be. We don't need to wait for anything to be complete.

OK, so we may not feel like we always know what we are doing. But like Rhys on the slopes, we are learning on the job, learning to be the church, the saints we are called to be.

Third Sunday after the Epiphany – “Have the Same Mind”

January 22, 2023

[1 Corinthians 1:10-18](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

This is a hard one, don't you think? In our increasingly contentious society and world, to consider that a sign of the kin-dom is that the community has the same mind might be a bit of an overreach. Yet here is the call from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And we're still in chapter 1! In fact, this is the first call the Apostle gives us in this letter, so he at least thinks it is important. Check the preaching notes for a more complete discussion of what the implications of this idea might be.

But let's not mute the high calling of agreement by saying it is something less than what it is. This isn't a live and let live approach, or an indication that nothing really matters as long as we're nice to each other. There is more here. More gospel, more truth, more invitation than we might realize. But there is also a clear prioritizing of approach and understanding. What Paul argues is that the community needs to take a higher place than we might think. In the USA, we sometimes overvalue the individual, and some branches of the Christian faith say that it is all about me and Jesus. Paul argues for something else than that. Yes, of course, the individual is important, but so is the church, so is the community of faith. We are in this together. Again and again, the gospel indicates that we are not in this alone, that we are made to work this out together; we are meant to be reconciled; we are meant to be in relationship with God and with neighbor. If one of our prime values is the building up of the body, then we approach differences and disagreements with a clear goal toward reconciliation. We want to preserve the community and not simply be right. This influences how we argue, or how we resolve differences or varieties of interpretations of scripture or applications of the gospel in our lives.

If last week we celebrated our abundance, this week we give thanks for our relationships. We can celebrate the life of the community, in fellowship, in learning together and serving together. We rejoice in our reach, which is always greater together than separately. There is an African proverb that says if you want

to go fast go alone; but if you want to go far, then go together. We are in this for the long haul, all the way to the kin-dom of God. And along the way, we live by kin-dom rules, we show kin-dom values, we rejoice in kin-dom priorities, which sometimes means I set aside my personal preferences for the good of the whole. But more often than not, we realize that my personal good is fulfilled by the good of the whole community.

So, we sing of the church and the joy that we have in communion and fellowship. We pray for the healing of broken relationships and misunderstandings so that our witness can be stronger. We give thanks for our leaders and teachers and pillars who have sacrificed much to help us be the church we are. And we continually look out for ways to be open to invite and include those who are not yet a part of the fellowship of the church. We live hand in hand inside but with an outward focus and hope. We are making disciples of Jesus Christ, and there is always room for more.

PREACHING NOTES

“Have the same mind.” OK, yes, well. How about we look at some of the other texts assigned to this Sunday? Maybe there is something there that is within the realm of possibility. This just seems out of reach. Or maybe we have decided that this isn’t all that important. Or not as important as being right, standing firm, holding on to principles and doctrines. In our hierarchy of behaviors, having the same mind isn’t very high on the list, or so it seems.

Yet just reading verse 10 will tell us how seriously Paul takes it as he makes his approach to all that is going on in the church at Corinth.

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (I Corinthians 1:10 NRSV).

How many times does he say the same thing in that single verse? “Be in agreement” and “no divisions among you” and “be united in the same mind” and “the same purpose.” All repetitions or at best nuances of the same idea. For Paul, what is tearing the church apart is the fact that they don’t agree. We’re still in

chapter 1, there is a lot more to come, and yet we start here, after the greeting and the establishing of credentials; we get this – be of the same mind.

Unfortunately, he doesn't seem to be all that keen in telling us exactly what it means to be of the same mind. Does it mean that we have to agree on every single point of doctrine and ethics? Does it mean that we have to read the scriptures in exactly the same way every time? Does it mean that there is absolutely no room for differences or nuance? That you have to apply the word to your life in exactly the same way that I apply the word in mine?

There are those who would argue that this doctrinal lockstep is what he is talking about. But then these folk might also agree that there can be differences in application or in priorities. Differences seem inevitable when dealing with human beings who are made differently and who have different experiences and histories. Where is the line, then? How do we know when we've drifted from the accepted thought process?

What if we back up a moment and ask what Paul might have had in mind when he told the church in Corinth to be of the same mind? The first thing to note is that he addresses them as "brothers and sisters." He uses a familial reference, even when trying to correct their behavior or at least their thinking about their behavior. "Brothers and sisters," he says. We are connected, we are united, we are the family that was created not by blood, but by the life and witness and death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Even in a conflicted situation, there needs to be a sense of connection, a belief in community. So, might we say that being of the same mind is that we all agree that our primary effort is in building up the body; or as Commander Spock said to his friend Admiral Kirk in the second Star Trek film – "the needs of the many, outweigh the needs of the few, or the one." (I know, he wasn't the first to say that, but it was a moving scene, you must admit.)

So, does this mean that we surrender truth? Or right? In favor of just sticking together no matter what? Of course not. Paul is writing this letter to correct behaviors and understandings that he argues are wrong, not of Christ, he says. But it does mean that there are ways we will go about making our arguments; there are behaviors that we will not accept as we seek reconciliation and new understandings. We won't tear one another down; we won't call names and point

fingers; and we certainly won't tell others not in the community what terrible people we are saddled with in the body of Christ. There is a call to a high behavior, no matter how frustrated or upset we get. There is nothing here about giving up trying to find ways of coming to a common mind.

Plus, and this is key: we listen as well as speak. "Where does that come from?" you ask? The next verses: "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Cephas" or Apollos or Christ. (Wait, Christ? Hang on we'll come back to that one.) What this sounds like is what psychologists call "confirmation bias." We listen only to the ones who confirm what we already believe. We aren't challenged to look at something in another way. We exist in our echo chambers, repeating our understandings and our beliefs, rather than digging deeper into the source of those beliefs and being willing to be challenged to another way of thinking or applying.

OK, Paul, Cephas and Apollos, maybe. But Christ? Why did Paul include that name on this list? As if there was some problem with saying, "I'm following Christ." Actually, it seems as though that one should be the antidote to the problems, rather than an additional division or a separate camp to follow. And that would be true in the best of situations. We can and should always call upon Christ to be the arbiter of our disputes and disagreements and multiple interpretations. Except that too often, we claim Christ as one who always agrees with me but not with you. And that to disagree with me is to disagree with Christ. The other side is not just wrong, but they are anti-Christ, which is about the worst thing we can think to say about them. Christ is not our exclusive property, no matter how "right" we might be. We cannot claim that only we follow Christ, even as we seek to communicate the Christ we have come to know.

It is hard to discern why Paul goes off to talk about baptism and what he did and didn't do regarding that sacrament. How does it add to the discussion, one can't help but wonder? Perhaps it has less to do with the sacrament and more to do with the budding institution that is growing up. Paul wants to maintain a "higher" or larger view of the movement and to concentrate on proclamation and not on church building. Perhaps this is an admission that by their closer view, they are doing what is necessary to maintain the purity of the church. But from his point of view, it looks very different. Maybe he is asking us to consider how our internal squabbles look to the wider world. They don't get wrapped up in the detail of the

theology behind the debate, rather they only see how we treat one another when we disagree, and that reflects badly on the larger church. So, he reminds us the crux of our proclamation looks very different from the outside.

That might be a leap, I acknowledge. But the call to watch how we live out our faith is clear. Even when we disagree, even when we have differences of interpretation, can we be on the same mind that Christ is the way of hope and of salvation? Can we come back to the core and find common ground even as we continue to move in different directions? Can we live in grace always?

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – “Blessed Are”

January 29, 2023

[Matthew 5:1-12](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

For the next three weeks, we dip into the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps the most famous extended teaching from Jesus from the gospels. This week, we look at what are called the Beatitudes, the first part of the Sermon. The preaching notes begin with a question about posting the Beatitudes instead of the Ten Commandments. What if we began by posting the Beatitudes in the church? Maybe you could post a list, a poster sized list of all the Beatitudes in the worship area or entrance. Or maybe you could make a poster of each individual statement and scatter them throughout the whole church. A visual representation of these powerful statements of blessing and promise, glimpses of what living in the kingdom of heaven is like, could be transformative for the whole congregation.

But the emphasis needs to be on the blessing. Jesus isn't condemning folk for not living into this promise; he is blessing those who already have a vision of what it means to be fully alive in Christ and encouraging those who haven't yet caught that vision to lean into the possibilities.

How do we balance blessing and challenge? How do we offer gratitude and exhortation both? Both elements can be encouraged during worship this week. Make sure the blessing is clear; we all need to feel that blessing, that presence of spirit and affirmation of our desire to follow Christ. At the same time, we can issue the challenge to continue in the way that leads to the kingdom. We can grow in faith and witness. As always, it is most helpful to give suggestions as to what the next steps might be. “Where do we go from here?” is a common question following an exhortation to grow in faith. If there is no direction after such a call, then it is better to not issue the call.

Are there groups to join for further study? Is there a mission effort that can use help and hands? Where can I plug in, how can I be useful? These and similar questions can guide the direction efforts of the worship team. Don't assume everyone knows how to be a part of the life of the church. There are those for whom church life seems alien, no matter how long they might have attended. Be

clear, provide help, notes if possible, something to hold in their hands and refer to later.

We are celebrating the church throughout this series. And we are recognizing the church as a gift that we dare not keep to ourselves. We are not blessed to feel better in ourselves. We are blessed to be a blessing.

PREACHING NOTES

Someone said that in all the furor to post the Ten Commandments in courthouses and on city lawns, that perhaps what we ought to post in our courts of law would be the Beatitudes instead. “Blessed are the merciful” might read differently on the wall of a criminal court, don’t you think? But then, we couldn’t do that, some would argue; that would simply be impractical. It wouldn’t fit in that place; that is a place of law, not grace.

And that is just the problem with the Beatitudes. They aren’t really practical. Some argue they are impossible. How in the world are we supposed to live up to that kind of standard? It is not within us to capture all these elements, no matter how great our desire. So, do the Beatitudes function like the law? Do they simply show us how far short we fall from what we are supposed to be? Do they layer guilt upon guilt on us so that we turn in utter despair to the Savior, confessing our complete worthlessness?

That is how some have presented these verses—a measuring rod for entrance into the kingdom of God. But if that is true, then why did Jesus introduce each verse with the word “blessed”? Actually, the word is *Makariou* (makarioi), which can also be translated as “happy.” You’ve seen that before. *Happy are those who...* It could even be translated as “blissful.” It doesn’t seem to me that Jesus would set us up for layers of guilt and then use the word “blissful” to describe the condition we can’t reach.

So, maybe these aren’t law. Maybe the Beatitudes are something other than a challenge to better living, or - as some have presented them - a psychology of happiness. Maybe they are something more.

What if Jesus began his teaching ministry with a word of encouragement instead of an impossible standard to attain? In the previous chapter of Matthew's Gospel, before the Sermon on the Mount begins, an amazing number of events transpire. Chapter four begins with the temptation in the wilderness, where Jesus declares the kind of Messiah he intends to be - to himself, to God, to Satan, to all of us. Then he returns and calls together the community of followers within which he will work his earthly ministry. Finally, he teaches and heals and draws increasingly larger crowds. And then chapter five lets us know his teaching. But in between the wilderness and the calling of the disciples, he makes this statement: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (4:17). And "repent" in this case isn't "shame on you," but rather, "get on board, turn around and follow me."

What if the Beatitudes were a snapshot of the community of faith instead of a measuring rod? What if Jesus was saying, Blessed is the community who makes room for peacemakers? Blessed is the community who makes room for the meek, for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who are poor in spirit. Blessed is the community who makes room those who mourn at the brokenness of the world, who is unstained by the impurity of the world. Blessed is the community who knows persecution is inevitable and still decides to make room for those the world thinks are unimportant."

Jesus was getting out the albums and inviting us to look again and see who we are, see what is among us. He was opening those folders we had forgotten and showing us our true selves. Sure, there is a call here as well; I'm not dismissing that. But it is not an impossible call because it is already among us in the community of faith. We learn from one another because we are gifted; we are blessed in different ways.

So, take a look at the snapshot of the community of faith. You might be surprised at how blessed you are.

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – “You Are”

February 5, 2023

[Matthew 5:13-20](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

Here again, Jesus asks us to reflect on the power we already have. “You are salt. You are light.” Not, “Do you want to be salt, or do you want to be light?” You already are. So, given that declaration from our Lord, how will we season? What will we light up? Once again, Jesus lays an expectation and blessing on us as we are called to be the church. He implies in this Sermon on the Mount that we don’t really have a choice in the matter. I don’t mean we are forced into something against our will. What I mean, and what I think he meant, was that we are the representatives of the church whether we consciously try to claim that role or not. People, neighbors, friends, and strangers will look at us and think, “Oh, so that is what it means to be a part of the Christian faith” or “That is what belonging to the church means in terms of how you live in the world.”

Given this truth, let us live humbly. That seems the only proper response. Let us live with grace and hospitality and kindness. Yes, we have opinions about how the world ought to be, but how we express them matters. So, let’s celebrate the salty ones in our midst. No, not that. Find the ones who are mentoring, the ones who are supporting and guiding. Start with teachers, but go further— youth leaders, confirmation mentors, new member teams, hospitality hosts; they are probably all around you. Or maybe a week ahead, hand out a card and invite people to tell who has helped them most, who has taught them about the faith, who has walked with them through a difficult time? Then lift up those names, give thanks to those who can remind us that you are the salt of the earth, and you are the light of the world.

Post or display pictures of the community at work together. And then give God thanks for the relationships and mutual support that is found in the fellowship of the church. Sing songs of the guidance and friendship of Jesus as the model and mentor for all of our relationships. The lifting up of the church continues as we seek to see and to be glimpses of the kin-dom.

PREACHING NOTES

One spring break many years ago, I took my daughter, Maddie—or maybe she took me (but then she didn't pay for anything, so I took her – that settles that)—to New York City for the week. Whew. You haven't seen NYC until you've seen it with a seventeen-year-old girl still wet from crawling out of her chrysalis but itching to try her wings.

Luckily, my younger brother lives and works in New York, which gave us a base of operations. He had the generosity to host us in more ways than I know how to thank him. It would have been a poorer trip in so many ways without my brother and his partner. It is good to have family.

We arrived the Monday of spring break (after a very early morning flight for which Maddie still hasn't forgiven me), were picked up at LaGuardia by Jason, who brought us by taxi to the apartment, showed us which corners of the tiny apartment were good for sleeping and storage, handed us our subway passes, and then went back to work. We set out for the adventure.

We took the Q train to Times Square. Why not start at the top of the mountain! We climbed out of the dark tunnel into cacophony that is Times Square, and the week went on from there. Maddie's first comment about her new surroundings was, "New York is loud!"

Loud, indeed. And fast and busy and distracted and distracting as well. Maddie's original plan was that we send her off on her own to spend a week with her uncle in the big city. I'm still glad we said no to that. Not just because I enjoyed the week away and the sights and sounds and experiences of New York and the too rare quality time with my brother, but because the idea of Maddie wandering those streets on her own gave me the shivers. Maybe we ought to just keep our heads down and our doors closed. Just to be sure. Just to be safe.

Safe is a good thing. We spend a lot of time and money on being safe or feeling safe anyway. It occupies our thinking quite a lot. Yet, it never seems to be on Jesus' list of things to worry about. He has a list, don't get me wrong. OK, maybe it isn't a worry list – after all he did say, "Don't worry." Call it a list of things to be concerned about. A list of things to pay attention to. And it is a long and involved list, full of significant and powerful ideas and moments and people. But nowhere

does safety enter into it. If anything, he seems to be a risk-taking kind of leader. “Get on out there,” he says. Go and do. Or perhaps, go and be.

“You are salt,” he says. You are light. No one lighting a lamp, hides it. Admit it, you are singing that song, aren’t you? “Hide it under a bushel, NO! I’m gonna let it shine.” Or if you aren’t, then you should be. Let it shine. That’s what Jesus says. Not, you notice, make it shine. Not shine it, but let it shine.

We just walked through the Beatitudes last week. We were reminded, though we often try to turn them into imperatives - get out there and be peacemakers, be meek, be hungry and thirsty for righteousness – Jesus doesn’t present them that way. He presents them as indicatives. He is describing, not commanding.

Likewise in these verses that follow those first twelve in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus doesn’t say, “Get salty!” He doesn’t say “Light up!” He says, almost as a matter of fact, “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”

If you’re like me, you can’t help but wonder, “When did that happen?” When did I become salt for the earth? When did I become light for the world? I’m just me. Just doing my best. Just watching out for me. Just trying not to get trampled underfoot. Jesus wants me to shine, to give light to the whole house.”

See that’s the thing about light; it doesn’t exist for its own sake. It isn’t about getting folks to look at the light. When we try to become the focus of attention, when we take center stage, we aren’t being the light. The light is there to help folks find their way. It is about shining on the path, about revealing the hazards along the way, about getting where we need to be with a minimum of detours.

And salt, salt on its own, for its own sake is not really a good thing. But as an enhancer, as a preservative, it is invaluable. In Jesus’ day, it was a common practice for farmers to salt their fields to add in the right mix of minerals to help crops to grow. The word that we translate as *earth* is literally *ground* or *dirt*. *You are the salt of the ground, the salt of the dirt*. Not a fun job, perhaps, but one that helps things to grow. That’s our job: Not to be the center of attention, but that which helps things grow.

Yeah, it’s risky. No question about it. It is a loud and noisy world out there, and we might be safer just keeping our heads down. But we can’t. Jesus tells us that

too. "A city built on a hill cannot be hid." He tosses that one in, even though it doesn't fit as well. It is a reminder that we are exposed. We are the representatives of the faith whether we want to be or not. So, we might as well be good ones. We are the manifestation of Christ in the world today, whether we claim it or not. So, why not claim it? Why not live as though Christ were alive in us?

That is what he is saying here, "You are the salt of the earth, why not help things grow? You are the light of the world, why not help folks find their way? Why not mentor, why not lead, why not be what you are, a sign of Christ's presence in the world today?"

"Get out there," Jesus says, out there in the world, the noisy, wonderful, scary, glorious world and let your light shine. Don't worry about being trampled underfoot; that only happens when you stop being who you are called and created to be. You are light. Let it shine.

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany – “But I Say”

February 12, 2023

[Matthew 5:21-37](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

There is a book for sale titled *What is the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* It's by a pastor named Martin Thielen, and the book is actually useful and helpful for those who want to know the essence of the faith. But a title like that seems to go against the teaching of our text from the Sermon on the Mount this week.

Jesus is raising the standard of behavior in this text. He is making it harder, it seems, to be a Christian, a follower of Christ. He wants us to go further, to go deeper. In short, he is asking us to not simply follow the rules, but to consider how our behavior and our choices and our attitudes impact the wider community around us. He is talking about our influence, on how Christians are called to influence their world in a positive way. It is a continuation of the salt and light idea.

So, we hold up the example of Christ in worship today. We sing of his ministry, his example, and his call on our lives. We hear the invitation to make the most of our lives, to take the narrow way and hold ourselves to a higher standard. We call upon the Spirit to strengthen us for the daily journeys of life and living. At the same time, we pray for those in our spheres of influence, those who look to us for guidance and for a sense of hope.

We also see in our text for this week a call to be forgiving and to work toward reconciliation in every relationship. Our prayers can include an openness to healing the rifts and grudges that exist between family or friends. If there is a need, provide a space for members to pray together, perhaps as a prelude toward full reconciliation.

Relationships within the body are important, but so is the relationship of the church with the wider community. How can you lift community concerns or needs in your prayer time? What acts of service within the community are already in place that you can celebrate? What additional needs could be met, or invitations

issued? Who is missing from the body of the church? Jesus calls us to go above and beyond in our attempts to see all the people.

PREACHING NOTES

It's my birthday next week; email me for my registry. Just kidding. It seems what we do these days on our birthdays is spend most of our time responding to Facebook birthday greetings. I'm not quite sure what the etiquette is for this sort of thing. But the twenty-first-century method of acknowledging birthdays is a Facebook post. I've gotten a few cards in the mail, a couple email "e-cards," but mostly Facebook posts.

Like I said, I'm not sure what you are supposed to do with these things. Do you just send a general "thanks for all the posts" on your status? Do you "like" each one? Or do you send a note? I don't send a note back to those who send me a card, but I've been responding to each one. It's kind of fun. But they keep coming.

I'm not the greatest Facebook person around. Some folks are excellent at it, both in posting their own stuff and in commenting on others. I've been told something about someone and asked, "How did you know that?" "I checked their Facebook page," is the response. It's a pretty amazing tool. We even have a Facebook page for Discipleship Ministries. Did you know that? You can "friend" Discipleship Ministries and make comments or get information. I don't know who administers it, and we're not sure who all is looking at it, but you should check it out.

Like I said, however, I don't know all the rules of Facebook, real or unwritten. I used to embarrass my kids by doing something "not cool" with my Facebook page, or theirs. I don't always update everyone on my status - partly because I have trouble believing anyone really cares. But some folks obviously think they do, because they'll tell the whole world anything and everything on Facebook. And I do mean everything. People have gotten into trouble via Facebook, but then apparently, regimes have been overthrown in part due to Facebook. At least if you believe the reports, and it is hard not to see something significant happening on the world stage.

That's quite a range, when you think about it, from "Having a bad hair day!" to "Join the revolution to depose the dictators!" But the same instrument serves

both causes. No wonder we want to know the rules. We don't want to run the risk of misusing this powerful instrument. I have some questions, to be honest, about how social media in general has impacted the common discourse in our nation and world. I frequently vow to just shut it all down and delete all the apps off my phone, but then find myself coming back. Some folks are asking whether these things are a net positive or a net negative for humanity. Depending on the day and the posts I read, I lean one way or the other on a regular basis.

But I'm not really wanting to talk about social media, except as a way of talking about learning how things work, learning procedures and systems, learning the rules. Learning the rules is a common exercise. Jesus knew that, which is why he took the time to talk about the rules in the Sermon on the Mount. He knew he was in a rule-based society, so he decided to take a look at the rules and to mess with everyone's head at the same time. "You thought you knew the rules?" he seems to be saying. "Well, listen to this!"

"You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you". Read through these verses and tell me you aren't overwhelmed a little bit. I mean, my goodness. Rules are one thing. But this ... This seems a bit much. Doesn't it? Extreme rules. Intense rules. Rules only for those who are really into rules. Or something like that. I mean, we've evolved as a society, haven't we? We've kinda let most of this stuff slide. No big deal, we say. Live and let live, we believe. To each his/her own, we believe.

But should we? We don't want to be sticks in the mud, yet reading these verses, it seems like this higher standard is something more than adding to the list of rules. It is as if Jesus is trying to get us to realize something about ourselves and about our relationships. And that something might be as simple as "pay attention." Or "these relationships are precious, treat with care." Or maybe even "community is a gift from God, don't waste it, don't abuse it, don't ignore it."

You see, maybe I'm just wired this way, but it seems to me that all these rules, all these higher ways of living are about community. They are about relationships. And Jesus is saying that we ought not take anyone for granted. We ought not run the risk of hurting anyone. We ought not treat anyone as less than a child of God. These aren't rules so much as a way of creating a community that resembles the kingdom of God.

Hmm, creating a community. I guess that means that Jesus was into Facebook before Facebook was around. And like Facebook, the community of faith can be about the little details of daily living or about revolutions and transformation. And maybe even both at the same time.

The birthday wishes will keep coming in for days, I know. They always do. Some from folks I haven't seen for a long time. Others from ones I encounter each week or even more. And yet there is this connection. Woven together by birthday wishes and the body of Christ; we are a community of respect and of joy. A caring community of hope and affirmation. We are a Christ-breathed community of transformation and spiritual growth.

I doubt that is what Zuckerberg had in mind. Now Jesus on the other hand ...

Transfiguration Sunday – “Super Sunday”

February 19, 2023

[Matthew 17:1-9](#)

Color: White

PLANNING NOTES

Transfiguration Sunday, like Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday, is about the identity of the one we follow. Jesus the Christ is revealed in glory on the mount of transfiguration. Like the disciples who were privileged to be with him in that moment, we often miss the significance or the opportunity to praise in our struggle to understand. This day is not about knowledge; it is about faith. It is a day for creeds or affirmations of faith. Let us rise to our feet and declare our allegiance to our Lord on this day.

For much of this series, we have celebrated the work of the church, and appropriately so. But we end the series by shifting the focus from us and our work, to Christ and the work that has been done on our behalf. We stand in awe; we bow in praise and adoration; we sing our joy and proclaim the name of Christ. We are who we are because of what he has done.

We might worship with joy and loud praise, or we might worship in silent awe and wonder. It is hard to determine the mood for a Transfiguration Sunday worship experience. It should fit your context. But it should stir up the people, quicken the heart and strengthen their faith. It is a day for affirmation and for grace and for remembering whose we are as the body of Christ. Truly a super Sunday.

PREACHING NOTES

It might have escaped your notice, but there was a football game last weekend. Although how it could escape your notice I don't really know. I am a pretty big football fan, as my wife and kids will gladly tell you, with appropriate sighing and eye rolling to accompany the announcement, since none of them share the passion. But even I think there is just a little too much hype about that game. I don't even know who came up with the word hype, but it seems tailor made for the Big Game. (You know no one is allowed to say Super Bowl Sunday for some reason.) The pregame show starts at 1 p.m., and the game doesn't start until after

6:00. Is that really necessary? There hasn't been a day when there wasn't some mention of the game. The hyperbole is rampant on the sports pages these days. And even the front pages. Super Sunday has leaked out onto the "real news" sections.

That's when even sports fans like me have to sit up and say, wait a minute. We've blown things out of proportion. We've gone a little bit crazy here, haven't we? It seems excessive, to say the least.

We Christians are a quieter sort. The big show, the over-the-top kind of display makes us uncomfortable. Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, go into the closet to pray, don't parade your piety; these are the kinds of guidelines by which we live. All this hype, all this attention, all this wide-screen technicolor display makes us squirm. That might be why the Transfiguration was never that popular with most Christians.

Okay, maybe it is a leap, but you gotta admit the production values on that mountain top were pretty spectacular. Three of the four gospels record this scene, though there are subtle differences in the telling. Yet, the clear implication is that there is something important going on here. There is some message, some hint, some understanding that we need to glean from the light show recorded in these verses. Jesus, who seems relatively sensible most of the time, all of a sudden pulls out all the stops and goes for the glitz, for the big show, the Super Sunday. It seems out of character somehow. It seems over the top.

Of course, we would never think that way because it is in the Bible and therefore must be important. Instead, we just ignore it most of the time. But what if we just went with it for a while? What if we filed into the stands and got our popcorn and nachos and watched the show? What might we see?

Our first question has to be, "Who is this for?" Are we looking over Jesus' shoulder as he reads his email, or is this addressed to us? This question has been debated hotly over the centuries, and there is no clear consensus. No, I take that back, the consensus is *Yes!* There is an element that is clearly a message to Jesus and is a part of the march toward Jerusalem that takes over the rest of the gospel. It is a pep talk, a half-time speech from the coach and the assistant coaches (Moses and Elijah, in this case. Don't ask me to figure out who is the offensive coordinator and who is the quarterback coach. Some metaphors aren't meant to

go too far!) But there is another component that is clearly a message to the followers, which includes us.

The Transfiguration quote is twofold: Part One – “This is my beloved Son” (or my son the Beloved, or my son whom I love - translation is a tricky business), which is a statement of authority. If the lightshow weren’t enough, now we have an interpretation - Jesus participates in (is a part of, comes from - theology is tricky too) the divinity of God. Part Two: “listen to him.”

It's that second part that Peter messed up on. There he is with his foam finger (Jesus #1!) And his face painted in Jesus colors (I don't know what Jesus colors might be - hmm, black and blue? Blood red?) and says “I wanna coach!” Okay, maybe that's a stretch, but what he was trying to do was to make a declaration about what was going on up on that mountain. He was trying to stake a claim, to second his confession by setting up a tent, or a tabernacle to contain the glory of God. The problem was, he couldn't contain the glory of God. This was God's moment; this was Jesus' moment to shine like the sun. It was a little presumptuous of Peter to want to put it in a tent. His job was to stand, or kneel, or fall on his face in awe and wonder—which he finally managed to do.

Our first responsibility is to worship. We are awestruck (when we really pay attention) by the wonder and the glory and awesomeness of God. Falling to our knees or lifting our hands and our voices in praise and singing, lifting our hearts in joy and compassion, is what worship is about.

I love that word “compassion.” The implication is that the passion we feel is to be shared, that's the “com” prefix. Our worship should do more than just give us a warm feeling in our hearts. It should transform us to shine like the sun as we bring light and life to those around us. Our family, our neighbors, our coworkers should know that we have been to worship. Because they see in us the desire to listen to Jesus. Worship is our moment to hear again the call to serve, the call to love, the call to give ourselves away. Worship is all about Jesus, but it is at the same time all about us. About him as the beloved Son and us as the ones drawn together in community and privileged to be able to listen to him. That means, and I know you saw this coming from the opening paragraph, for a follower of Jesus Christ every Sunday is a Super Sunday.