

WGUMC January 29, 2017 "Jesus' Inaugural Address"
Matthew 5:1-12

In preparation for a series on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, I've been reading Richard Rohr's book called *Jesus' Plan for a New World*. In that book, written 20 years ago, Rohr calls this sermon Jesus' "inaugural address." How fitting that the lectionary gives us these chapters in Matthew the week after the inauguration of a new president.

In these first chapters of Matthew, we get the inauguration of Jesus. In Chapter Three, Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River by John and then driven out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit where he is tempted by the devil. He comes back from that experience tested and hardened for the task ahead of him. So in Chapter Four, he calls his disciples together and begins to proclaim the good news of the reign of God while curing every disease among the people. Then, in Chapter Five, just like Moses, Jesus goes up the mountain

where he gathers his disciples round him and sits down to teach them.

Now, as you know, U.S. Presidents use their first address after taking the oath of office to paint a picture of what they would like to do as President. We listen carefully to their words so that we can envision what kind of country our leaders are going to try to create. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is doing the same thing. He has already been campaigning around Galilee, proclaiming the kingdom of God. Now, in his inaugural sermon, we get his vision of what that kingdom looks and feels like. As we shall see in the next few weeks, his vision is a far cry from our reality.

But that doesn't mean that the kingdom of God is unreal or that it exists only in heaven and not on earth, only in eternal life and not this life. We know this because, when Jesus was baptized and came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and the Spirit descended upon him. And in that

moment, heaven came down to earth in the very person of Jesus. So you could say that Jesus is the blueprint for the kingdom of God and what Jesus gives the disciples in the Sermon on the Mount is not a description of life in heaven, but a vision for life on earth. That's why he taught us to pray: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Remember this as you read Jesus' inaugural address. Moses didn't give the Ten Commandments thinking that maybe they would be useful someday. Neither did Jesus preach his Sermon on the Mount to tell us how to live in some far off future, but to teach us how to live today.

I appreciate that Jesus begins his inaugural address with a blessing. Jesus begins with a positive vision of life. Instead of starting out complaining about all the things people are doing wrong, as many of the prophets did and politicians do, Jesus begins by blessing those who are doing things right.

But don't be fooled, for these blessings do have a bite. In every verse where Jesus is talking about the reign of God, he is in the same breath challenging the reign of man. The problem is that we are so familiar with these words that we can't hear how radical they really are. What Jesus is saying and what the authorities are hearing is that when God's Kingdom comes, your kingdom will have to go.

As an example, let's take just the first blessing: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Now Luke's Gospel simply says "the poor." But Matthew adds "in spirit." Yet the word used for the poor is the same in both places [*ptochoi*]. That tells me that Matthew is not talking about the downhearted here. He's not trying to spiritualize poverty. He's not even talking about the average poor, the peasants, which made up 80% of the population back then. No, the word he chooses is a word used for the poorest of the poor, beggars. And what he adds "in spirit" to include those who may

not be beggars themselves but live as if they were; in other words, they are WITH the poor "in spirit."

Beggars are people who can't lose anything because they don't have anything to lose. Unlike most of us, they aren't tempted to think that they are in control and that they don't need God, because they know that they are out of control and utterly dependent on the mercy of God. They don't have the resources to fake it like we do, so they have no choice but to be Real. And according to Jesus being Real with God is only way to be blessed (or "happy" as the original Greek has it.)

When you think about it, this is the exact opposite of our understanding of happiness, isn't it? In most inaugural addresses you will hear expressed the assumption that the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of wealth are one in the same thing. In fact, this is "the American Dream."

Can you imagine what would happen to this world if we all lived by the truth that our happiness comes from being Real

with God and that our possessions are actually standing in the way of our being happy? The world as we know it would fall apart and be replaced by the Beloved Community.

According to Jesus' inaugural address, the Reign of God is the place where the poor are blessed; where those who break down in grief are built up by grace; where the powerless and those pushed to the margins are brought to the center; where people hunger for justice and don't starve to death waiting for it; where mercy not money is the common currency; where people can see with their hearts what they can't see with their eyes; where peacemakers are not punished and the persecuted are rewarded and rejoice.

Could there be such a place anywhere on this earth? As many of you know, I took Kristen to the Women's March on Washington last week. I met my two sisters and my niece there. We stayed at my brother and sister-in-law's house in Fairfax and took the Metro into the city last Saturday. I went because I

had to do something to stand up and speak out for what I believe in. And despite all the evidence to the contrary, I still believe that my country can look a whole lot more like the Beloved Community.

It was an incredibly uplifting experience. A half million women, men, and children gathered at the intersection of Third and Independence Streets and spilled out for blocks in every direction. My family and I arrived an hour before the rally began, and I stood on the same spot of asphalt for nearly six hours because there was no place to move, no space to march. Yet there was no pushing, no shoving, and no acting out. Everyone was friendly and courteous and in good spirits. The "marchers" had come from all 50 states and many foreign countries, from all genders, ages, races, and classes, and at least for a few hours, there was a powerful feeling of unity, of coming together and affirming each other's humanity. For me, it was a kind of religious experience. Right there, in the nation's capitol,

where I would have least expected it, I caught a glimpse of the Beloved Community.

I found myself wanting to say to the people gathered there: you don't have to come to Washington to experience this. Come to Jesus and you can live it right where you are. You don't need 500,000 people to feel it. Wherever two or three are gathered in his name, that's where love and justice reign.

As incredible as the march on Saturday was, it wasn't the only place where I glimpsed God's kingdom last weekend. On Sunday, I took my daughter to see the monuments that we couldn't get to the day before. I hadn't been in DC in ages, so I was eager to see some of the memorials that have since appeared on the Mall: the Korean War Memorial, the FDR and Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorials. But my favorite by far is still the Lincoln Memorial.

I walked up the steps where the "leftovers" from the day before were still chanting. I turned to the wall on the left and

began reading the Gettysburg Address and immediately I choked up. I thought about where we are as a country and wanted to climb up on Lincoln's lap and have a good cry. When I thought of good old Honest Abe and his strength and humility, his eloquence, his courage and his integrity, I did cry. And I wondered, what did that giant of a man live and die for? Have we learned nothing in all this time? Do we have to fight this same war in every generation?

It had started raining outside, and I wanted to think that God was crying, too. Then I walked over to the right side and read his Second Inaugural Address. As you know, it was written at one of the lowest points in our nation's history. But out of the depths of the hell that was the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln managed to speak words of healing and hope: "With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who

shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan—
to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting
peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address ended where Jesus' began, with a blessing. Elected to lead a mortally divided nation, Lincoln still believed in a power that could bring people together. I do, too. But this is what gives me hope: I believe that that power comes not from any politician or group of people, but from the Living Christ in whom God's kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. And may God bless us every one!