

WGUMC February 5, 2017 "New Self, New Path"
Matthew 5:21-24; 33-37 and 7:13-14

Richard Rohr refers to the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus' inaugural address, but that sounds a little too establishment to me. A more fitting title would be The Manifesto on the Mount because this sermon is full of revolutionary ideas. Since I cannot possibly unpack the whole thing, I'm going to focus on just a few verses over the next few weeks.

As I mentioned last week, Jesus came to proclaim the Kingdom of God and you don't have to read very far into this sermon to realize what a topsy-turvy place this is, where the last will be first, where those who have power and privilege will be brought down and those who don't will be lifted up. It all begins with the Beatitudes and I have to hand it to the Latino pastor who had the courage to read them at the president's inauguration a few weeks ago. I can't think of any words that are more needed in Washington today!

But we will never be able to live in this new kingdom if we don't first become new people. We're going to need a new self before we can set out on a new path or build a new society. So, the revolution has to start right here. Our pride and prejudice have to be turned upside down and our selfishness has to be turned inside out. Behavior that we think is justified has to be delegitimized.

Most of us will manage not to commit murder, but what about anger? There is plenty of that to go around these days, and is it doing us any good? Are we becoming better people for it? Jesus says, "If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." Washington, listen up: Jesus is coming to drain the swamp!

But before you get all excited, remember this: our politicians are just mirrors for the people who elect them. That

means that a lot of us live in a swamp of anger, too. Oh, we think it is righteous anger, and maybe it started out that way. But the longer we let it fester, the more likely that it will become self-righteous anger.

So what would Jesus have us do with it? Stuff it? We know how well that works. It will let loose anyway and pity the innocent civilians who get in the way! No, Jesus would not have us stuff it, but channel it. Before we get to the altar, we need to go do something about it.

Granted, there are many situations that understandably provoke us to anger. After all, there is plenty of injustice in the world today. But Jesus wouldn't want us to waste our energy. In other words, don't get angry; take action! And believe it or not, we do have the power to do so. It was given to us by the Holy Spirit in our baptism. Our ritual says, "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice and

oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?" If so, then we have what we need to take action.

Here's one example: we used to teach our kids that it wasn't nice to call people names. Grownups didn't do that. Well, thanks to social media, they do now and some of us are wondering if there is no going back. Individuals and whole groups of people are targets of name-calling and bullying. But baptism reminds us that each one of us is made in the image of God and that image—however tarnished it may be—must be honored and respected in everyone. And so the vow we take at our baptism is a vow not to get caught up in this demeaning war of words. We don't have to fight this fight because God has already given us the grace to resist this evil. Given a new birth by water and the Spirit, we are better than this; we can overcome this. So always remember: pause before you post; count to ten before you send.

Unfortunately, all the anger and rudeness and coarseness of our public life has a way of seeping into our private life and affecting our relationships, as well. It isn't only that we get angry at other people, but we have to live with the fact that we've said and done things to make others angry, too. We have misunderstood, misjudged and mistreated others, and the harder it is to own that fact and seek forgiveness, the harder it is to own the forgiveness given to us at our baptism.

To recognize when we have wronged someone, to be willing to admit it and make amends for it, is a rare thing these days. It requires a level of honesty and humility that we don't often see. Maybe that is why Jesus said, "the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it, [but] the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few that find it."

I admit that this verse has often made me squirm. I don't like the idea of a gatekeeper God who lets in only a few and

keeps out the many. The God I believe in draws the circle wide and welcomes everyone in.

But as I reflected on this text this week, the Spirit helped me to see that there is a way to believe in both the narrow gate and the wide circle. Think of the narrow gate as the Truth. I know, it's been taking a daily beating. We have people swearing up and down all kinds of things that aren't true. Every day we are flooded with false oaths, fake news and alternate facts. Who can be trusted that their yes is really yes and their no is really no? It would be easy to think that this is all coming from the evil one.

But Jesus assures me that there is still truth in the world because he embodies it. He says, "I am the way and the truth and the life." And when he goes on to say, "No one comes to the Father except through me," [John 14:6] I take that to mean that no one comes to God except by way of the truth, the truth that is life.

So you see, no one can get through the gate under false pretenses. If we are operating out of our false self, if we are living a fake life, we're not getting in. The only way we can come to God is by accepting the bare-naked truth.

The problem is that none of us have it. None of us can claim to have the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about ourselves or anyone else. Yes, I have my truth. You have your truth. But let's be honest: neither of us is very close to The Truth. So thank God there is also mercy.

The wide mercy of God gives us the grace we need to get through the narrow gate, as long as we realize that the grace that is wide enough to include us is also wide enough to include the brother or sister that has something against us. So Jesus tells us, "when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

Jesus' Manifesto on the Mount is in one sense a manifesto on mercy. As Pope Francis keeps reminding us, mercy is the only thing that ever could turn the world upside down. I invite you to come to the table of God's revolutionary mercy. But remember that we can't receive what we aren't willing to give, so ask the Spirit to call to mind anyone who has anything against you. Go to God in prayer, asking God for the humility and honesty and courage you need to seek out, receive and practice the grace of reconciliation in your relationship with them. Then your honest, humble, truthful heart will be your best gift to God.