

Sermon Epiphany+4A January 29, 2023

Fr. Nick Smith+

Micah 6: 1-8

Psalms 15

1 Corinthians 1, 18-31

Matthew 5: 1-12

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Imagine, if you can, the day when Jesus climbed up the side of that hill, turned around to look at the crowd that had followed him, and sat down to think. Imagine how with all his divine insight he could look at that whole crowd and yet see into the soul of each individual person, perceiving all their hopes and dreams, all their troubles and guilt, all their needs and fears. And imagine the compassion and love he must have felt for each of them. The one who was and is and is to come lovingly surveying those who have followed him, pausing at each man, woman, and child to know and care for them. And, miraculously, he knows each name. And in that timeless crowd, we are all there. All the souls who have walked this earth are there. And then, as Matthew reports, Jesus calls his disciples to come sit with him, and encourages them, too, to scan the crowd with their eyes and hearts. Perhaps he even pointed out some examples and told his friends what he saw. This one down there in the red cloak, he is blessed with mercy because he has been so merciful to so many. That woman there with the head scarf, she is in mourning for someone who has passed out of her life, and she's desperately asking herself 'what do I do now?' I tell you friends, she will be comforted by me and by others, and her question will become 'what's the faithful thing to do now?' And that boy there, carrying the basket, he has been bullied by other children who mock his attempt to always do the right thing, no matter what. I know he will have his joy in the blessing of true friendship with the faithful. Each of these restless pilgrims you see down there has been given the opportunity to receive blessings. Oh, that they would open their hearts and minds to that happiness."

These first twelve verses of Matthew's chapter five are known as the Beatitudes, and they are the beginning of what is commonly called 'the sermon on the mount'. If you ever plan to be a Jeopardy champion, or win any other trivia contest, then you should remember that this famous sermon is found in chapters five through seven of Matthew's Gospel. And over the next 3 weeks we will hear some parts of that teaching, as Jesus addresses both his disciples and the crowds which have gathered in his Name. It is a distillation of his thoughts about how human beings can be integrated into the Kingdom of God, of the attributes which will help us find genuine relationship with our creator, of the manner in which the lost sheep may be located and returned to the fold. These are important thoughts. These are important and compelling teachings. For here we find out just who Jesus thinks are the real Bible heroes. And it may not be who you think. Would you expect your hero to be meek, for example? Or to endure the persecution of others who just don't understand? Yet Jesus teaches that it is precisely those who will win the day, who will heroically achieve the rewarding relationship with God. They will be filled, comforted, receive mercy, and will be called the children of God. In the Lord's community, they will be the heroes.

During this past year, my grandson Wesley (who turns four this week BTW), has somehow taken Abraham Lincoln as his hero, and in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, I think it's a wise choice. Now, you can say many things about our 16<sup>th</sup> president, and so much has, of course been said, but Lincoln has endured as a beloved and admired character while so many other historical icons have recently been disrespected and cancelled from our national heritage. I don't recall any statues of Lincoln being pulled down (the news might have escaped me, of course). And while the Lincoln Memorial might, to some, look disturbingly like an ancient Greek temple to some graven image of a mythical God, it seems to me to be an enshrinement of the values Jesus has taught in the Beatitudes, for whom Lincoln was a hero. He was, indeed, known to be meek, pure in spirit, merciful, to have endured criticism for those values, to have longed for peace, to have mourned the sacrifice of others, and to have hungered and thirsted for

righteousness. So, little Wesley's parents have encouraged his love for Honest Abe, not as inappropriate hero-worship, but with the hope and joy that those Sermon on the Mount values have infected his heart.

Last fall, Wesley knew exactly whom he wanted to represent for Halloween. Having heard and read multiple biographies of Lincoln, and having been stunned by the painting of him at the national portrait gallery only a couple of blocks from their home in D.C., there was just no question. He directed his mother in the creation of his costume, insisting that the hat be tall enough and that he have a copy of the Gettysburg Address to carry. He will gladly recite some of the speech if you but ask. At the Memorial, he was hounded by tourists for photo-ops, some of whom offered him money for a special pose. But it was the experience of adoring the famous values of this terribly human man, and showing special friendship for him, which has captivated young Wesley. By chance, daughter Olivia discovered that Abe Lincoln had a cottage in the hills above Washington, which is still maintained as a historical site. During those years of the Civil War, Lincoln would escape the heat and the swampy environment of the capital city by riding horseback to his hilltop retreat, from where he could look down upon the bivouac tents of the soldiers and all the discouragements of leadership. He would try to leave early in the morning so as to evade the duty officers who were meant to escort and protect him, and then he would pause along the route to speak personally with the soldiers. So, Olivia took Wes there one day, toured the cottage and spoke with the caretakers. As they were about to leave, Wesley thought about what he admired about Abe, turned to his mother and told her how much he had enjoyed the visit, and then said "but actually I have some work to do, Mama, so could you please take me back downtown to the White House?"

At the National Cathedral in Washington, which you should know is an Episcopal Church BTW, there is, appropriately, a larger-than-life bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln. When you enter the church, it is just inside the door to your left. When daughters Olivia and Marietta were children, we used to take them there once a year for Sunday services, and the statue became a familiar highlight. I used to have to lift the kids up to reach Lincoln's outstretched hand. Though the statue is dark bronze colored, that hand has been worn bright and shiny by the thousands of visitors who have touched it, held it, and caressed it. It is an iconic demonstration of the love we have for these values of the Beatitudes, expressed by one of our own who just happened to be elected President at a truly difficult time in our history. So I'm looking forward to lifting little Wesley up to reach those heights when we visit Washington this week for his birthday. And I hope that next time you're in our nation's capital, you will take that detour up Massachusetts Avenue to worship and explore at the Cathedral, too.

Meanwhile, back at the Sermon on the Mount, the disciples, who BTW are new to this ministry of the Lord, look down the hill as Jesus has suggested, and we might hear them ask skeptically: "So, rabbi, why are you so devoted to this motley crew of pilgrims who followed us here? They all seem pretty ordinary and unremarkable." Jesus might shake his head and then pointing say: "Consider then my servant Abe there. Believe it or not, blessed is he in his humility, for He will inherit all the value of the earth. And blessed is he who has prayed for peace, for he is certain to be known as a child of God. It would serve you well, my disciples, to follow the example of his life. He has been vital to our divine kingdom, and one day I will have the privilege to tell him so face to face. Like him, always ask yourselves this: What is the faithful thing to do? And, like him, let that question lead you to the next questions and destinations along your own pilgrimage, that your lives may also be a blessing. And, as you proceed from one faithful question to the next, give thanks. Give thanks to God for heroes of the faith and the faith of heroes. Amen