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Matthew 6:7-21

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“On Prayer and the Community of Beatitude”

We have been going through the Gospel of Matthew over the last several weeks. What have we seen so far? We have seen the way the Evangelist has located Jesus within the history and faith of the people of Israel, as a descendant of Abraham, Jacob, and David – the patriarchs and kings of the past – and as one who teaches with the prophetic authority of Moses. We have seen that, for Matthew, Jesus is the one whom the people of Israel have long expected, the *messiah*, the “Anointed One,” the one to whom all the prophets point and in relation to whom the popular preacher and Elijah look-a-like, John the Baptist, feels unworthy to even carry his sandals. And we have seen how Matthew locates Jesus within the social and political context of his time; Jesus is a strange new king, indeed, for he is a migrant, fleeing with his parents the violence of a reactionary, egotistical leader. We have also seen the humanity of Jesus, the temptations that he faced, his need to find space for rest and time for himself away from the crowds of people that encircled him from every direction. And we have seen how the core of Jesus’s preaching and teaching centers on his announcement of the Good News that the kingdom of heaven has *drawn near* to the earth. We have seen how, for Jesus, the nearness of heaven is connected in a profound way to the outpouring of God’s love and presence with and among the poor, the outcasts, the disabled and disfigured, those without a social or political standing in the world. Last Sunday, we read and reflected on the Beatitudes together, how they serve as a kind of preamble to the Sermon on the Mount, which stretches from chapter 5 through chapter 7.

Now, this morning we find ourselves smack dab in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. Last week I mentioned that the Sermon on the Mount should not be viewed as one *really* long sermon, as if it were given all at once in one time and place – though at text group on Tuesday morning Hermann observed that my sermons are quite a bit longer than Jesus’s! – but rather we should view the Sermon on the Mount as a collection of Jesus’s teachings drawn together from a number of different sources. I suggested that we view these teachings less as a set of ethical instructions, of list of do’s and don’t’s, of virtues and vices, but more as descriptions or signs that point us to the reality and the presence of the kingdom of heaven, the very *activity* of God on earth. It would seem that the call of discipleship within this framework is less about living a good life or becoming a good person or upstanding citizen and more about *discerning* in the midst of our everyday lives, both as individuals and as a community, the living reality and the living presence of heaven, and perhaps such discernment can only happen when we are given over to a certain readiness, a certain openness of our bodies, our hearts, and our minds, to *participate* in the reality and activity of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven on earth. That we are called to such *discernment* of heaven’s happenings in our daily life seems clear enough and that we are called to such *participation* in discipleship of Jesus in a concretely *visible* way also seems abundantly clear when in Chapter 5 Jesus implores his disciples to be like light and salt, a *visible* community of Beatitude: “You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (5:13-15).

But here in Chapter 6 we encounter a very different message. Here in Chapter 6 we are given a warning: the visibility of our faith – letting our light shine – is in a sense, a double-edged sword. Indeed, there is a certain danger to a visible faith for Jesus, so dangerous in fact that Jesus is concerned that the disciples might misunderstand the calling to be salt and light as if he were suggesting that the community of Beatitude is somehow *above* the rest of the earth, as if the community is itself the visible kingdom of heaven on earth. The issue of visibility is one that Anabaptists have wrestled with since the beginning of our history. We believe that the church community is to be *visibly* different than the rest of the world, refusing to conform to the values and commitments of the wider world. And, yet, the danger to this is that we begin to see ourselves as somehow *better than* and *more holy than* the rest of the world. *We*, the Anabaptists, are the chosen few, *we* are the true disciples, and *they* (Lutherans, Catholics, Evangelicals or whatever) are part of “the world,” sinners and hypocrites. If you think that language sounds a bit strong and condemning, you should read some of the early Anabaptist literature!

The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Discipleship* observed that Chapters 5 and 6 of the Gospel of Matthew “collide hard against each other.”¹ We appear to have a series of paradoxes with which to wrestle: “Let your light shine before others,” but in Chapter 6 he warns the disciples to “beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them” (6:1) and when you give alms “do not sound a trumpet before you” as the hypocrites do (6:5), and when you pray don’t go out and pray in public on the street corner, instead “go into your room and shut the door” (6:6). According to Bonhoeffer, the “The call to be extraordinary is the great, inevitable danger of discipleship.”² What does he mean by this? Are we not called to be extraordinary people? I think what Bonhoeffer is getting at here is the danger that the disciple would begin to confuse him or herself with Christ. The temptation to view my own actions in the world as Christ’s actions. He is pointing to the danger of the church community to become self-glorifying, self-satisfying, and self-serving. In short, it is the temptation to make the church community itself an idol, to view the church as both the purpose and goal of discipleship, as an end in itself and for itself, as a kind of microcosm of heaven on earth.

But for Jesus, the call to discipleship is not about bolstering up or glorifying the virtues, beauty, majesty or peculiar greatness of the church; instead, the call to discipleship is simply the call to *follow* the One whom has gone out ahead of us, for this One alone is the source of our life together, and it is this One alone who is worthy of our worship and our praise. The community of the Beatitudes is the community that does *not* seek its own *glorification*, but seeks only after *faithfulness* to Jesus.

So, too, the prayers of the disciple and of the community are not to be self-glorifying or self-serving, rooted in a desire for public recognition or praise, but instead our prayer is to be oriented *to God*, our father and our mother in heaven, and to the coming of God’s kingdom on earth, that God’s will be done. Jesus instructs his disciples to *not heap up empty phrases* in our prayers, but to recognize that our needs and our desires are *already known* by God. I find this freeing. I think it takes the pressure of performance off of us. The other evening at our Youth Faith Formation gathering we had a conversation about the meaning and purpose of prayer in our individual lives and in the life of our congregation. I had to confess to the youth that I really had no clear practice of prayer and that if I were to be completely honest, I would have to confess that I have often found it very difficult to pray. A strange confession, perhaps, for a pastor to make, especially you might think in the presence of the

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 149.

² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 146.

youth of the congregation. And, honestly, I did not confess this merely as a concealed gesture of personal piety, say, of personal authenticity. I confessed it because it is true. I mean, I have learned to grow comfortable with praying our congregational prayer, offering up in words the collection of joys and sorrows of our community week in and week out, but when it comes to personal prayer, prayer that comes from the depths of my heart and soul, that is much more difficult for me. Perhaps some of you do not struggle with prayer. Perhaps some of you have daily rituals or devotional practices that help to facilitate time for regular prayer. Perhaps for some of you prayer is something like a habit of the heart—something that simply grows naturally out of a deep wellspring of personal spirituality. Have you ever met someone like this—someone for whom prayer does not present itself as a problem, as a particularly difficult act, someone for whom prayer seems to come so easily, so naturally, as if it were indeed something of a second-nature? I have often found myself at times to be secretly jealous of such people, and so I've sought out resources to grow in my spirituality, you know the sort of thing I am talking about – prayer books, soul-food books and the like, authors like Henri Nouwen and Thomas Merton and Parker Palmer – to help me become more like them, more like the saints, to help me become a person of prayer, a spiritual person. But they've never really worked for me. To be honest, I have never been able to develop what one might call good spiritual habits and practices. But perhaps that's okay. Perhaps I do not need to be so anxious about it or feel guilty about the inadequacy of my prayer life, or the weakness of my spiritual life. Perhaps what Jesus is saying here is that we should *not* look to be *extraordinary* in our praying, just as we should not look to be *extraordinary* in our discipleship, because prayer and discipleship are finally not about *us* and our peculiarity or extraordinariness!

There is a certain simplicity to the teaching of Jesus, even while his message of seeking after a “better righteousness” strikes us as quite demanding. And for those of us who have difficulty praying, he provides us with a prayer to say. The call to discipleship is simply to give ourselves over to Christ, to follow after him in the particularity of our everyday life, and we are given to pray simply *for* the coming of the kingdom of heaven, and *for* the will of God to be done on earth. And so we are freed from having to craft extraordinary prayers or demonstrate our extraordinary piety before others. We are free simply to be our selves, in all of our ordinariness and brokenness and humanness, before God and before others.

Of course, this does not mean that we are to go on living as before, living as the rest of the world does, storing up treasures on earth, stockpiling and exploiting the resources of the earth for our own personal interest and gain and satisfaction. Discipleship of Jesus frees from needing to live in this way, frees from the fear and anxiety that lies beneath the desire to store up treasures, the fear that we will *never have enough*. We are freed instead, in our bodies and hearts and minds, to give ourselves over to the coming of the kingdom of heaven, which is not a kingdom for the extraordinary few, for the 1% – they already have their reward! – but a kingdom that comes to bless the many, the people, a kingdom that is not based in scarcity of resources, but in the great abundance of the earth, a sign of the abundance of God's love and God's faithfulness for us. Lord, may your kingdom come! Help us, O God, to discern and participate in the reality and presence of heaven on earth, not for our own sake or for our own self-glorification, but for the sake of the many, the children of God, whom you call blessed.

