

I love the gospel of Matthew. Matthew was written to communicate the Jesus story to early Jewish Christians and, let me tell you, the writer of this gospel really knew how to tell a story! Beginning with Chapter one, verse one, we hear Jesus called “The Messiah.” The writer of Matthew begins by setting us up for something amazing, something big, something life changing and something surprising by naming Jesus as the Messiah. There had been many would-be messiahs popping up around that time in history, as there have been throughout history. Most of them got the people hyped up about the political scene and Roman oppression. There had been great expectation among Jewish people that a messiah would soon arrive, a messiah who would use military might and **power** to **free** them from Roman oppression. So, Matthew’s version of the Jesus story begins by latching on to that expectation and announcing **Jesus** as the long promised, awaited Messiah. The writer of Matthew continues to build on that expectation by linking Jesus’ genealogy to royalty as King David is named an ancestor of Jesus. The story even includes royal sages from the East who come to pay homage to this newborn Messiah. Then, the knowledge of a newborn king is **so** threatening to the present Jewish king, King Herod, that Herod has all the infants he can locate massacred. The

presence of this newborn king Jesus is so compelling that even powerful Herod **fears** him.

If that is not enough, the writer of Matthew then tells us about a **mighty** prophet who enters the scene, John the Baptist. John arrives wearing strange clothing, living in the wilderness and eating bugs, while shouting out and calling people to repent. This wild prophet said, “Turn around – if your life journey is **going down the wrong road, turn around and go the other way!**” And, with that he began announcing that One who is even **more** powerful than **he** is coming, One who “will be powerful enough to bring justice on the wicked and set things right.” (Feasting on the Word, p. 239.)

Well, the stage has been set and excitement levels have been raised. We can almost hear the trumpets blaring as they announce the coming of this new powerful leader. The day has finally come. This is the day that the new leader people have been hearing about is going to make his first major public appearance and they expect something big. People's excitement levels are shooting off the charts as they sit down on the mountainside and strain their ears to hear what this new, powerful leader is going to say.

So, this new leader climbs up the mountain, just like Moses and David and Elijah, those great leaders from the past. And then, when he finally speaks, he gives his inaugural address and they are not only surprised, they are astounded. They are totally taken aback when they do **not** hear anything about using **power** to take charge of the situation they are in. As a matter of fact, what this Messiah is saying has **nothing** to do with rescuing them from Roman oppression. As he begins to speak he says, “**Blessed** are the **poor in spirit**, for **theirs** is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they **will** be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they **will** inherit the earth.” He goes on with a whole series of blessings and then says, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.....”

What?? Rejoice and be glad when you are persecuted? This was definitely **not** what they had been looking for or hoped for. No. Not only are his words something they did not expect, Jesus also begins his message by saying, “**Blessed.**” Now, the Jewish people knew their Hebrew scripture and they knew the Psalms. They knew that the great Law psalm, Psalm 1, begins with exactly the same word, *blessed*. You see, Psalm 1 begins like this, “Blessed is the one who walks not in the way

of the wicked but in the way of the Lord.” And, *ashar*, the Hebrew word for *blessed*, really means something like “**You are on the right road.**” So, what Jesus is actually saying is, “You are on the right road when you are poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. You are on the right road when you mourn, for you will be comforted.”

Now, do you begin to understand how astonishing and surprising these words of Jesus were to people 2,000 years ago? This was absolutely NOT what people expected to hear. And, you want to know something else? These words are **not** what **we** expect to hear either. You see, we live in a world and culture where the Beatitudes we hear seduce us into believing:

- You are on the right road when you win the game, when you are the one who achieves and succeeds, when you come out on top.
- You are on the right road when power and strength are on your side and you come out winning because then you can claim God is on your side.
- You are on the right road when you buck up and avoid mourning, when you don’t shed those tears because then you can show how strong you are.
- You are on the right road when you pursue the American dream, work for success and really start making lots of money to invest in the Kingdom of Wall Street.
- You are on the right road when you are one of the popular ones and you raise your kids to be the popular ones and become popular leaders.
- You are on the right road when you support policies that limit assistance to the poor and the immigrant population and the asylum

seekers because free handouts do not encourage the poor to find work.

Oh yes, the list goes on and on and on.....

Well, today, Jesus gives us life-giving words that do **not** fit into the *you are on the right road boxes* **we** have created! Today, Jesus is calling his disciples, including each one of us, to walk a very different road. He is calling us to walk the road that is the way of **his** will for our lives and for this world. And, that road looks very different from the road we hear about day in and day out in our culture. In fact, Jesus is describing a road that is **totally** countercultural!!!

Jesus is calling us to walk the road **he** initiates, to walk the road that draws us into the very life of God, the road that leads us into the world that is truly real, the road where we will find the deepest and truest meaning in life, the road where we will find **life** that truly matters! Jesus is saying:

- You are on the right road when you are aware of your own poverty and you are at the end of your rope, when you are aware of your own struggle and feel as though you have lost faith. God is naming you among the most faithful.
- You are on the right road when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you begin to know the embrace of God, the One who is **really** most dear to you.
- You are on the right road when you are content with just who you are – no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourself proud owner of everything that cannot be bought.
- You are on the right road when you've worked up a good appetite for God. Feasting on the life of God is the best meal you will ever eat.

- You are on the right road when you care deeply for others. It is **then** that you will find **yourself** cared for.
 - You are on the right road when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.
 - You are on the right road when you can show people how to **cooperate** instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who **you** really are, and discover your place in God's family.
- (Paraphrased from *The Message*)

Jesus' words to us today are not just empty platitudes and promises about something that will happen at some point in the future. No. As Jesus speaks, his words to the people on the mountain and to each one of us announce a **whole NEW world**. His words announce a whole new world that is breaking in upon us, a world that he is inaugurating, and a world he brings to us. His words are all about the **very real world of God**, the very real world that becomes flesh and blood through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls and invites us to walk with him on the road **he** is walking, the road where we will find the deepest, truest meaning in life. This is the message the writer of Matthew's gospel wanted to tell, because the truest gospel in this Sermon on the Mount is Jesus, the One who **gives** the sermon, the inaugural address: **he is** the sermon made flesh. (Feasting on the Word, p. 240)