

4 Epiphany Bishop's Convention Sermon January 2017
The Rt. Rev. Mark Bourlakas (read at St. John's 1/29/2017)

“God *chose* what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God *chose* what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God *chose* what is low and despised in the world... to reduce to nothing things that are...”

The Apostle Paul writes these words to the church in Corinth, because he wants them to understand the radical worldview that Jesus was teaching and calling them to live into. The messiah of God's design for life in community is what we hear in his teachings on blessing. God chooses differently than we do. ‘My ways are not your ways,’ says the LORD.

Up to this point in Epiphany we have been watching Jesus call people into his midst. ‘Put down what you are doing, follow me, and I will teach how to draw people into new kind relationship with each other.’ Jesus is starting a movement.

Last Sunday, right before this Sermon on the Mount teaching, we heard Jesus proclaim, “*Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near.*”

These words of urgent conversion are important for our understanding of Jesus’ Beatitudes teaching on this morning that concludes our Diocesan convention. This insistent cry to repent is significant because these blessing teachings of Jesus’ are about the very nature of the kingdom of God.

Jesus is making it clear, right at the beginning of his mission and ministry that things are nowhere near what they seem to be. Reorientation is critical. An about-face; a deep repentance is called for. The way we think about the world; the way others might believe it should be is not that way God’s kingdom necessarily works.

Now before beginning his sermon on the mount, Matthew sets the scene. He begins the chapter with- *“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain.”*

When Jesus *saw* the crowds. I was stopped right there.

In our national life, during last week’s inauguration weekend, we witnessed a wide variety of large crowds.

There were crowds of celebration and curiosity on the day of the Inauguration. There were crowds of opposition and frustration in the Women’s Marches that occurred everywhere the following day. And there was a crowd that filled the Washington National Cathedral, our Episcopal Church of St Peter and St Paul with Bishop Mariann Budde presiding over an interfaith service praying for wisdom, peace and unity.

Some crowds are passive and gather for entertainment. Other crowds are active and call out for action. Some are somber and wait for something mysterious to happen.

A crowd surrounds Jesus. He sits down on the high ground and prepares to address them. What is this crowd up to? What do the people yearn for? They are most likely not all of the same mind or motivation.

Now we need to be clear this morning that Matthew, writing his gospel message decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, is addressing the Church. We are its intended hearers. Jesus is the Lord of the Church and we are his disciples. We need to get clear and be constantly reminded of God's priorities.

Jesus sits down, his disciples gather around him, and crowds quiet to hear this rabbi. With the Sermon on the Mount, the master's teaching begins.

As Jesus announces God's blessings we must ask ourselves, "Where are we in this crowd? Are we up close to the circle of disciples or are we loitering about on the periphery somewhere?"

We are most certainly not the poor. And we are rarely those who are even poor in spirit or meek. Are we those who mourn and genuinely grieve the suffering of God's people around the world? Are we those who practice mercy and work tirelessly for justice? Are we dedicated peacemakers?

In this culture of unrestrained materialism and excess, we are far too distracted to be truly pure of heart. And we are certainly not being persecuted for our proclamation of the Gospel.

If you showed up to a gathering of children with a big plate of warm chocolate chip cookies to hand out, those children would not naturally form a straight quiet line, nor should we expect them to. Children will, of course, push up as close as they can, jockeying for position and edging out others. This is natural. From a very young age this is our natural human tendency.

When goodies are being handed out we desire to be at the front of the line. We don't want to come up empty or find ourselves at the back of line.

Tragically, too many of God's children live at the back of the line and come up empty over and over again. They suffer the devastating consequences of natural disasters like hurricane Matthew that battered Haiti this past October. We pray that our St. Nicholas gift of \$6,000 will assist Father Noé with recovery efforts and strengthen his ministry in the Central Plateau in the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti.

God's children struggle for survival in war torn areas around the world. They are brutalized and murdered in civil wars from Syria to the Sudan.

And crushing poverty, poor education, inadequate or nonexistent healthcare punish God's children in this country and throughout the world.

Jesus is teaching us the values and principles of God's kingdom. God's dream for all his children is to turn the inequalities and rank injustices of the known world upside down. Jesus points the direction of our discipleship towards those at the back of line; those living on the margins of our daily awareness.

I have recently been reading an inspiring new collection essays on Christian community titled: Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People.

There is a particularly penetrating essay by Jean Vanier on welcoming and being with those on the margins. Jean Vanier is a Christian theologian, spiritual author and founder of L'Arche an international federation of communities now spread over 35 countries, for people with developmental disabilities and those who assist them. Vanier preaches and lives out the heart of the Gospel.

He writes this in an essay titled ‘Welcome’:

“There is something prophetic in people who seem marginal and difficult; they force the community to become alert, because what they are demanding is authenticity. Too many communities are founded on dreams and fine words; there is so much talk about love, truth, and peace. Marginal people are demanding.

Their cries are cries of truth because they can sense the emptiness of our words; they can see the gap between what we say and how we live.”

We need to become alert enough to recognize the gap between the call of our discipleship in Christ Jesus and the way we go about our lives the majority of the time. Our proclamation and service to others must be committed and authentic.

Jean Vanier's work centers on three core Gospel questions:

What does it mean to be fully human?

What does it mean to serve others well?

How can unity be fostered among diverse people?

Vanier's questions lie at the heart of the Jesus movement. They are the types of questions that will Dwight Zscheile and the Missional Network will be using to guide us, as a diocesan community, into becoming more and more a part of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement.

As I've listened again in these past couple of weeks to Jesus' teaching it became clear to me that this teaching is not addressed to us as individuals. Rather it is addressed to the crowd. It is addressed to us, the church. The church must occupy a different way. Jesus calls on us, under the power of the Holy Spirit to assemble an alternative crowd in this broken world.

Jesus teaches the values of God's kingdom to the gathered community and says to us, "*You are to be salt to the world.*"

Where we might fall short as individuals, we must strive to succeed as the Church.

This is the way of Jesus movement. We must pray and strive become the movement together. The Jesus movement, as our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry puts it, calls us to be a community of people committed to living the way of Jesus, which is loving, liberating, and life-giving. And then committed to going into the world to help this world become one that is loving, liberating, and life-giving.

We must work together to inaugurate this movement that loves, liberates and gives life to everyone who yearns for a new reality, a new hope, a fair and just society.

This work requires minds to think, hearts to love, and hands to serve.

The interfaith inauguration prayer service last weekend at our National Cathedral came to a close with a prayer from Archbishop Demetrios, the Primate of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America:

Give to all the people of our land, O God, the desire to serve you. Deliver us in our various occupations from the service of self alone, that we may do the work you give us to do in truth and beauty and for the common good; for the sake of him who came among us as one who serves, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN