

February 2, 2020

Matthew 5: 1-12

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Heaven is Here and Now”

Jesus does not want us to believe in God...What did I say? Let's hear it again. Jesus does not want us to believe in God. I know, this doesn't sound right and if that was all I said this morning we'd have good reason to be concerned. How can I say, “Jesus doesn't want us to believe in God?” Well, when we read the gospels, it is obvious. Jesus doesn't want us to believe in God. Jesus wants us to experience God. It comes down to where our faith is centered. Does our faith connect mostly to our heads or to our hearts? In other words, is it the *idea of God* we are attracted to? Is the reality of God something we have to wrap our minds around, as if it is a concept or belief with which we must agree? Or, is God the name we give the experience we have when we are connected to a presence that pulls us beyond ourselves? Presence...this is a helpful descriptor of a heart-centered faith, the experience of the presence of God. We often refer to the reality of God as both filling us and wrapping around us. God's presence shapes us, inside and out. And, here's the thing, this work of God is not limited to whatever is true about us in the moment. Our head wants to tell us, “It is what it is. We are who we are.” Our heart wants us to know there is no limit to what God can do. And so, this is an important question about our faith, whether it moves more toward the head or the heart. Now, faith involves both, of course, but sometimes we lean so heavily toward the thinking side, to the side that says we've got to get our belief right or that we've got to get the correct answers to the questions, we miss the experience of God, the presence that connects God's heart to ours. This morning we've heard words of Jesus and his words are not so much about increasing our knowledge as about deepening our experience. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus refers to what he calls, The Kingdom of Heaven. His message is that this heaven-presence is now, and it's not something we're just supposed to wrap our minds around. Heaven is in the here and now, opening wide our hearts and making real what God is doing. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:3) Anyone will tell us that being poor in spirit, or poor at all, sounds like a bad thing. Well, when it comes to God those who hunger and thirst for a relationship with God are blessed. What Jesus says about blessing may leave some scratching their heads but when we hear that the poor in spirit, and those hungering and thirsting for God, and those who grieve or those who are troubled are blest, it opens our hearts to a hope and a healing we never thought was possible.

The tragic and unexpected death of NBA superstar, Kobe Bryant, his 13-year-old daughter, Gianna, and 7 others in a helicopter crash near Los Angeles last Sunday stunned not only sports fans but many across the world. I was listening to a news report a day or so after the accident and the reporter said one aspect of dealing with the grief is finding answers to our questions. We want to know. “Why did this happen? How could this happen? What went wrong? What caused such a horrific outcome? What factors contributed to the helicopter going down? Could the tragedy have been avoided? Is someone at fault?” So many questions. The reporter was making the point that overcoming our unknowing helps us put things back together. Yes, that is true in a way, but no amount of information will change what has happened. Events like this, especially those that involve such loss, can't be made better by explanations. Many hearts are hurting in the wake of this accident, and this is where Jesus wants to connect the experience of God with our pain. Jesus doesn't say, “When you get your questions answered you'll be OK.” He doesn't say, “When you know why it happened it will be fine.” Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” God meets us where we are and accepts us as we are, and there is blessing in that. For Jesus, this in-breaking of heaven into our world is now and this blest life doesn't wait until we get our act together or until we get it figured out. Friends, our heads can only take us so far, and this is why Jesus comes to us, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, bringing heaven's light and hope.

Let's continue reflecting on the tension between our heads and hearts, because it does impact what we believe. We're in the midst of a home improvement project in our house. Workers have been coming and going and they've had questions about the electric or plumbing, subjects about which I know very little. One of the guys working at our house was talking to another fellow, discussing some aspects of the job. The first guy has expertise in a particular trade but he doesn't know as much about another area, and so the second guy told him to “google it.” That worker said, “ You can find just about anything on the internet.” I held back a quiet smile, thinking to myself, “If I could google the answers to all of this I wouldn't need you guys.” You can see where we are with all of this? If turning our lives around were as easy as plugging the right question into a search engine, we'd do it ourselves. The fact is, a life of faith isn't a DIY kind of experience. There is no instructional video on how to turn a poor or hungering or fragile life around. This is God's work in us. St. Augustine, the great thinker of spiritual matters out of the history of the Christian faith, said this, “Love is the highest form of knowing.” This is what Jesus brings to the

world. God's love is the power. God's love is the presence. God's love means we don't have to wait to get our lives all fixed before the blessing starts to flow. The kingdom of heaven is now.

As I conclude, I hesitate to give us something to think about as we leave our worship today because Jesus' message in the 5th chapter of Matthew isn't meant for our minds. Jesus invites us to open our hearts and to receive the gift of God's love. When it comes right down to it, this is all that is required, and you and I, no matter who we are or what's happening in our lives, are just where we need to be to experience the blessing of God's presence - now, tomorrow, and the days after that. Amen.