

Rise!

Why is it that when demands are made to put religious sayings on public property it's always the 10 Commandments — and never the beatitudes or the sermon on the mount?

The answer is quite simple.

While the 10 Commandments allow us to continue to run the show on earth with a few rules and regulations designed to keep society from devolving into chaos, the beatitudes, and the sermon on the mount turn everything that we are used to on its head.

The beatitudes are a series of blessings of life's conditions — that nobody hopes for.

Who wants to be spiritually poor?

Who wants to mourn?

Who wants to become meek?

And those people who're always yammering about justice?

They're so annoying!

The sermon on the mount will continue again next week as Jesus calls his disciples to be salt in this world.

To be lamps set high, so that their light is seen.

In other words, Jesus calls us away from a life based on personal success: money, power and fame, and toward a life that lives deeply within the flow of life.

The Beatitudes in their essence are calls to live where life is truly lived.

In deep harmony with and respect for one another.

Where caring for each other is more important than caring just for ourselves — or for those who happen to look like us — or talk like us — or smell like us.

The beatitudes and the sermon on the mount are a reminder that God owns this world, not us.

And as so many fathers and mothers of the church have said over so many centuries, all of the abundance on this planet is a gift from God — to all of God's children.

So that when some grow rich and others are desperately poor, those who are rich are in fact thieves — against whom the poor have a just claim.

St. Vincent de Paul used to counsel the rich women of Paris who handed out charity to the poor, to pray that the poor forgive you your charity.

Meaning, what you think you are giving out of the goodness of your heart is in fact returning, often grudgingly so, that which is owed to the poor.

It's why so many Church mothers and fathers over the centuries insist that if you have two coats or several pairs of shoes and you don't give the excess away to those who don't have — you commit theft against the poor.

The beatitudes and the sermon on the mount are rightly called the constitution of our faith.

They set out the parameters of what it is to be Christian.

And next week we shall talk even more in depth about the kind of radical change in outlook and perspective that the Beatitudes and the sermon on the mount call us to.

If you ever wondered why Jesus ended up on the cross, its precisely because he undermined not only the political values of the day, but the religious and spiritual values too.

Values dependent upon hierarchy, and the earning of just desserts, and social stratification that all of us take for granted everyday.

As we move forward in our ministry together here at Emmanuel, we will frequently be challenged to re-examine how we live out our faith and how we live out our life.

That it's not enough to simply come to church and do a few good deeds.

We really are called to look at our whole society and our role in it and ask, is this really what Christ calls us to participate in?

Can an authentic Christian life remain silent in the face of social structures which ensure that many remain desperately poor while so few are grotesquely rich?

What shall we do with our oh so human love affair with needing to control people, places and things?

Can we learn to let go of such compulsions?

And then relax into the flow of God's love?

I have a social media presence and I frequently get pushback from those calling themselves Christians.

And they're frequently upset at the thought that God loves LGBTQA+ people or that God commands us to welcome the migrant as if they're our own family.

They are frequently upset at my criticisms of the current administration who in my view demonize the very people that Jesus tells us to protect.

And what I try to point out to them when they raise these objections is that Jesus stands in a long line of prophets who spoke truth to power.

Always insisting that God is not interested in religious ritual, but in a just and loving heart.

And in a just and loving society.

Among these prophets is Micah, from whom we heard this morning. The prophet Micah, who tells the people in no uncertain terms that it's not sacrifices of animals or money or blowhard prayers that God is looking for.

But rather the things that God asks us for are incredibly simple and yet, incredibly difficult to do.

Listen to Micah once again:

"He has told you, O mortal, what is
good;

and what does the Lord
require of you but to do
justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your
God?”

The problem is this: it's so much easier for us to give money or to engage in a variety of religious rituals than it is to undo the circumstances of our life that deprive so many of peace, justice and equity.

It is far easier to think of ourselves as “the saved of God” because we have said the Jesus prayer or been baptized or receive holy communion — than it is to be kind to that heavily accented person on the other end of a phone call with our credit card company.

Or to see the misery and need on the faces of desperate Central Americans, or Sudanese or Palestinians who must escape from the geographical hell holes that they currently live in.

Hell holes that our own nation has very often helped create and sustain.

This is particularly true in Palestine and in Central America.

Can we muster the kindness to extend an open hand to these our siblings or will we rely on “law and order” and the sanctity of borders that results only in continued suffering and pain for vulnerable people?

And finally, the question that really gets us to the core of things.

Do we really need a savior?

Or have we done enough good things and so earned our salvation?

Because, if we've earned our salvation, we don't need a savior.

If I've earned my salvation, then God — owes me.

I don't owe God.

This is a central heresy in today's Christianity.

The idea that I can either earn or be entitled to my salvation — rather than my salvation being a pure gift flowing exclusively from the mercy of God.

Because if I'm entitled to my salvation, then I can look down my nose at those who aren't.

Isn't that the folly of claiming you're saved if you say you're on the Jesus train — and you're damned if you're not?

Instead, Jesus invites us muster the humility to see that because I can neither deserve nor earn my salvation, then perhaps the graciousness that I receive so freely from God is the same graciousness that I can share with you.

Not only with my friends and neighbors but with that family coming across the border, seeking asylum.

With the Sudanese seeking desperately to leave refugee camps, where women and children are routinely assaulted and slaughtered.

So you can understand why the Beatitudes and the sermon on the mount are not the first thing that comes to mind when folks are intent on posting religious slogans on government property.

Because the beatitudes and the sermon on the mount upend everything that government property, and government ideology, stands for.

With whom do we stand today?

With the status quo — or with Jesus?

Amen.