

**Sermon Before the Congregational Church of Salisbury**

**Sunday, June 15, 2014**

**An Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount**

*“Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teachings...”*

*Matthew 7:28*

Good morning!

This is not going to be a usual sermon, because we are today talking about the world’s greatest sermon. So this is more of a lecture.

From the last part of our scripture lessons this morning we hear the initial reaction to Jesus’ sermon. This was my reaction as well after I first read it many years ago and each time I have read it since. I was even more impressed researching a paper on The Sermon on the Mount while I was at Harvard Divinity School to find the number of eminent persons and theologians who have commented and written on this work. I was standing in the basement of Andover Library at Harvard Divinity School when I was a student there and beheld full bookshelves of with “Sermon on the Mount” in their title by great authors. This is indeed humbling. Before greatness, what can one add about this masterpiece or speculate further on it’s origins? But today I want to give you an outline of the work and also a taste of what

we will be studying this summer in our Bible classes starting July 11<sup>th</sup> and for six Fridays at 11.00 am thereafter (this is a commercial!).

According to Matthew's story, this was Jesus' first sermon after he begins his ministry following his baptism by John, his time in the wilderness and John's arrest.<sup>1</sup> When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain "and sat down to teach his disciples", the crowd overhearing the teaching, and the world as well after it was recalled and recounted by Matthew. Was this an historical event? While there are no mountains in this part of Galilee, there is a hill on the north end of the Sea of Galilee, near Capern that is a unique natural amphitheater where a speaker can be heard naturally for 200 yards<sup>2</sup> and there is also a Roman Catholic chapel called the Church of the Beatitudes nearby (have any of you been there?). This may not have been an historic event, but it may also be just a compilation of Jesus sayings by the by the evangelist and others. Whatever the case, like a great poem, it carries its own power and immortality.

At first glance the text looks relatively straight forward and represents nothing more than the simple truth of Jesus' message and direct principles of mortality and ethics. But soon we realize, like on entering the Acropolis of Athens or the Cathedral of St. Peters in Rome, it is not an ordinary experience. We may walk through as a tourist, but if we get a good guide

book or a guide and spend more time, upon closer examination of the architectural and spiritual wonder, things get more complicated and diverse, with no end in sight. Such is this work.

As Martin Luther puts it from his *Wochenpredigten* written in 1530/32:

With these words he [Jesus] now concludes the teaching he has been presenting in these three chapters, and wraps it up as in a little bundle, where it can all be found. Thus everyone can tuck it in the bosom and remember it well. As if he were saying: ‘Would you like to know what I have preached and what Moses and all the prophets teach you?’<sup>3</sup>

What is interesting is that Luther not only sums it up, but mentions Moses, whom Matthew maybe is trying to compare Jesus to and trumps Moses. He goes up the mountain and sits down to deliver this sermon, calmly and succinctly proclaiming the word of God, while Moses had to go up into the fire, thunder and lighting and bring back Ten Commandments carved on a stone tablet. As we heard in our New Testament reading this morning, here are ten gentle, yet profound, Beatitudes (blessings) that directly engage the human psyche. They are a radical departure from what is understood or preached in the past, starting with “Blessed are the poor in spirit” that puts everyone at ease, anxious about what they are going to hear. That gets your attention right away as everyone can relate to that, particularly after a hard work week or when our spirits are down.

This work belongs to the genre of epitome and is pedagogical. There is no real analogy of this in either primitive Christian or Jewish literature and harkens more to Epictetus's *Enchiridion* used in his academy. *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius is such a text also. These fundamentals "canon" or "rules" a philosopher must always have a hand for his or her training. It was for the teaching of Jesus disciples, Han Dieter Betz, who wrote extensively on this, maintains: "It is not law to be obeyed, but theology to be intellectually appropriated and internalized in order to be creatively developed and implemented in concrete situation of life."<sup>4</sup> Reading it will change your life, at least your attitude toward it.

As Jesus was a Jew, the teachings of The Sermon on the Mount are Jewish in theology and cultural outlook. The particular brand of Judaism that produced The Sermon on the Mount was called "the Jesus movement" or "Jewish Christianity". Matthew was the product of a Jewish Christian community at the crossroads after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 63 AD.<sup>5</sup> They were excluded from the synagogue and were in exile in Syria facing the issue of future dealings with the Gentiles. Ulrich Lutz, an expert on this gospel, says of Matthew:

"The core of its content is how Jesus was rejected and executed in Israel, pronounces judgment on Israel's leaders and people itself and becomes the salvation of the Gentiles."<sup>6</sup>

Luz speculates further that the Gospel of Matthew can be broken into five chapters, just like the five books of the Pentateuch. He points out that in The Sermon on the Mount the very word "righteous" is repeated five times and "father" fifteen times. That's why we are reading this on Father's day! He thinks these two key words express the theology of The Sermon on the Mount. He also notes the main section of the The Sermon on the Mount is framed by "the law and the prophets" (5:7; 7:12)<sup>7</sup> and centered on the Lord's Prayer. It is like a great diamond that is discovered and may have been put in a number of settings, polished by a number of craftsmen over the years, but survives over the ages because of the incredible value of its gleaming self.

We don't really know who the author of the text was. Matthew, the tax collector, maybe? One of my most memorable artistic moments was standing in Rome, before Caravaggio's great painting "The Calling of Matthew" where Matthew is depicted in the midst of a group of money-counters in a Renaissance pub. This is the insert for of our bulletin this morning. In order to see this great painting you have to put a lira in a little box in a dark corner of a Roman church and it is an overwhelming and mystic experience when light does come on.

As a reformed tax collector, Matthew would have taken The Sermon on the Mount to his heart, but we don't know if The Sermon on the Mount was the work of such

a man. Was the Sermon on the Mount an actual speech and placed in Matthew's gospel or a collection of sayings from "Q", or the version of Q Matthew or whomever the author used, or some other ancient source? By the way, "Q" stands for "*quelle*", a spring in German. It is an ancient book of Jesus' sayings now lost, but thought to be used by Matthew, Mark and Luke to compile their gospels.

Most scholars now think both Matthew and Luke used *a Q* source that may have been different from one another and/or Luke had Matthew's work and another "*Q*" source.

There are actually two Sermons on the Mount in the New Testament written for Betz further speculates that it was written for different audiences. Matthew's Jewish-Christian audience while a shorter, but similar Sermon on the Plain ("SP")(Luke 6:20-49) was meant for a Greek-Gentile community instruction<sup>8</sup>.

Does the phrase "Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" (Matthew 5:46) that does not appear in the SP, betray the hand of the evangelist writing it? Scholars even posit that the canonical authority of the Gospel of Matthew may have been derived from the fact it contained The Sermon on the Mount, believed to be the centerpiece of Jesus' teachings.<sup>9</sup> Thus Matthew is canonically the first of the Gospels even though Mark was written first, because of the weight of the Sermon on the Mount in its text" - a sort of Executive Summary.

Many notable theologians and scholars have commented on The Sermon on the Mount; Iranaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) wrote his first commentary on The Sermon on the Mount not long after his conversion setting it aside as a piece of literature by itself apart from the Gospel of Matthew<sup>10</sup> (this is how I personally prefer it as well).

There was a fascination in the middle ages with the numerical symbolism especially the numbers seven and eight as they appear significant for The Sermon on the Mount. Thomas Aquinas was the great commenter for the Reformation, more interested in the dogmatic content and then there was Luther's interpretation in the form of his weekly sermons already quoted. These sermons "surpassed anything written on The Sermon on the Mount before as regards the depth of insight into scripture, theology and human life."<sup>11</sup> Huldrich Zwinli (1484-1531) comments are notable because for him the whole purpose of The Sermon on the Mount was to form "the inner man." He believed you can't read this text without being changed; what do you think? John Calvin also made important contributions recognizing that both The Sermon on the Mount and The Sermon on the Plain are collections of Jesus sayings bringing together a synopsis of his teachings as a guide for a pious and holy life.

An analysis of the body of the text itself can be quite complex; there are whole books on The Sermon on the Mount's structure. Betzs gives a lengthy ten

page conspectus in his introduction alone. In summary, however, The Sermon on the Mount is composed of four clearly distinguishable parts, carefully structured within themselves and closely related. Part I is the introduction and is called rhetorically the *Exordium* that we read for our scripture lesson this morning. It consists of ten beatitudes, eight structured in strict parallelism and the last concluding with a call for joy, a fitting climactic end. The primary function of beatitudes seems to be liturgical and secondary as a reminder of the ritual experience.<sup>12</sup>

The commission is given to the disciples as a group through two powerful images as they are expected to play as “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”. This light is God’s light that makes up everything that was at the beginning of the world as we heard in our Hebrew Bible reading this morning in Genesis. The one thing that can motivate people to honest worship is that they witness other human beings doing good deeds, playing these roles. The Beatitudes and commission contrast the highest and lowest: poor creatures are promised the wealth of heaven and dirt becomes the light of the world<sup>13</sup>.

Part II is the entire body of The Sermon on the Mount (5:17-7:12) is constructed as a ring composition, indicated by the expression “the law and the prophets” at each end. There is evidence from Greek philosophy for division in three parts that deal with the fundamental concepts of God and cosmos first, the

cult second and third more apparent variations. The first subsection is devoted to the in the interpretation of Torah (5:17-48). The middle section (6:1-18) is devoted to three main acts of worship alms giving, prayer, and fasting, the primary means of human response to the revelation of God's will in the Torah. The center piece of the Lord's Prayer calls attention to the centrality of approaching God in prayer. Fasting is singled out as the ritual of self-denial and sacrifice. The Golden Rule comes at the very end at 7:12<sup>14</sup>.

Part III contains three sections of eschatological warnings (7:13-23) like "Enter the narrow gate" and "beware false prophets" while Part IV is a peroration and double parable describing success and failure; i.e. building your house built on rock or on sand. It is interesting to note within the view of where it is thought this might have been given, the assembled, i.e. those living near the Jordan flowing into the Sea of Galilee, would have been familiar with its periodic flooding of the river and consciousness of building houses safe from flooding.

What price this jewel, one of the greatest speeches ever given? I think Martin Luther assessment from 1530 sums up the value of this text best for today and the future:

How could anyone formulate it more briefly and clearly than in these words? ... Thus, if we always measured out life and action by this standard, we would not carry on in such a brutish way and throw his teaching into the wind, but we would have more than enough to do,

and become ourselves masters, in effect teaching ourselves what we ought to do. Then we would not need to chase after the holy life and holy works, nor would we need so many lawyers and law books. Thus, this teaching is concisely formulated and can be learned, if only there is the diligence and sincerity to do and live accordingly<sup>15</sup>.

The Sermon on the Mount continues to play an important role as a core ethical rudder for modern societies. It is the consistent core of a thread of literature I teach at in my course at Georgia Tech. That course runs through Augustine, then the core moral teaching of Jefferson's remarkably edited bible (in four languages), it was the life changing center of Tolstoy's new religion in the last 30 years of his life and the development of his non-violence theories. These resulted in Tolstoy's correspondence at the end of his life with Gandhi, a young lawyer in South Africa who was thrown out of the 'whites only' compartment of a train there reading Tolstoy's book. It refined and led Gandhi to non-violent action in South Africa then India that changed the course of history there. Then it was at the core of Martin Luther King's non-violent philosophy. He was fascinated by Gandhi as a college student. This became the strategy of the civil rights movement and transformed the South (and the country). It is why today Atlanta, that embraced it, is three times the size of Birmingham, that didn't. This torch passed onto Thich Nhat Hanh, a living Buddhist saint who protested the Vietnam War and a number of peace/non-violent activists since then and it goes on.

There is, of course endless, analysis and summaries that could be recited. I think a quote from a lecture by Dr. Helmut Koester, an eminent New Testament scholar sums up Jesus' teaching in a nutshell:

Here, Jesus invited those, who are willing to enter already now into the kingdom of God in anticipation of the future. The preaching of Jesus speaks of the obligations and ethics of entering into the kingdom of God already in this life: loving one's enemies (!), blessing those who are one's persecutors, canceling of debts, not judging others, but turning the other cheek, forgiving one another 70 times 7 times. Those who are blessed are not righteous people who have fulfilled the law, but the poor, those who are hungry and those who are in sorrow. *It is not a preaching of a new morality or new piety rather, it is an invitation to enter into a realm of existence beyond all piety and morality namely the realm of love that transcends all limits set by morality and tradition.*<sup>16</sup>

This literature is the pearl one sacrifices all for. It pushes ethics and morality to a new level that we can only attempt to live up to this. The bar was raised by Jesus in his sermon and we all need His help to approach and endeavor to live our lives by it.

Thank you. Let us pray -

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<sup>1</sup> “One of John the Baptist followers was a certain Jesus from the Galilean town of Nazareth. One fact about Jesus that has always been accepted as certainly historical is the report that Jesus was baptized by John. It is apparently after John’s imprisonment that Jesus began to resume the prophetic message of his master. ” Prof. Koester’s Lecture Sept 10, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia website: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermon\\_on\\_the\\_Mount](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermon_on_the_Mount)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Motto, pg. V.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Dieter Betz. “The Sermon on the Mount: Its Literary Genre and Function.” Inaugural Lecture U. of Chicago 16 Oct. 1978 pg 1-16.

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Luz, “Matthew the Evangelist: A Jewish Christian at the Crossroads” p3-17. Studies in Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2005.)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pg. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Op. Cit. Betz The Sermon on the Mount commentary, pg. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pg. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pg. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pg. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pg. 61-62.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pg. 63-64.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther *Wochenpredigten* (1530/32) Weimarer Ausgabe, Vol 32. P 494.

<sup>16</sup> Prof. Helmut Koester “The Heirs to the Tradition of Israel” Class Lecture Sept. 10, 2009.