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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/29/2017, The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
Matthew 5:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.  
(Matthew 5:8, KJV)

In the Simon and Garfunkel concert in Central Park, back in 1981, they added an extra verse to their song "The Boxer." It was a verse about getting older, but not really changing all that much. That extra verse goes this way:

Now the years are rolling by me  
They are rocking easily  
I am older than I once was  
And younger than I'll be  
But that's not unusual  
No, it isn't strange  
After changes upon changes  
We are more or less the same  
After changes we are  
More or less the same

Lie la lie...

"The Boxer," Simon and Garfunkel. recorded in September 19, 1981  
at a free benefit concert on the Great Lawn in Central Park

But in our Lord's Sermon on the Mount before us, Jesus is talking about changing. We are not to remain "more or less the same." Indeed, we are to seek a pure heart. If we already one, then I guess we do not need to seek one. But for many of us, we have some changes in store if we are going to be blessed in this particular way:

<sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.  
(Matthew 5:8, KJV)

I want to see God. I bet you do too. So we have some changes lying before us, I do believe. Jesus beckons us onward toward a pure heart.

I love our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. I doubt that I can improve on it by preaching. I mean, I bet there are people in this world who came to faith in Christ not because of some wordy preacher, but because they chanced upon

the Sermon on the Mount. Maybe they were confident intellectual, modern people. Maybe they were people of some other faith. Maybe they were bank robbers or pirates or terrorists. Or maybe they were simply reading the Bible as an assignment in a college literature class. But they chanced upon these chapters, Matthew 5-7, and they were won to Christ. This Sermon – our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount – this Sermon strikes a chord in many a heart. For some people, they read the Sermon or hear the Sermon and something heavenly in their heart is stirred. Maybe it is an ancient memory going all the way back to the Garden of Eden. They hear the Sermon and are reminded of how we were in the beginning, fresh from the hand of our Maker. Or maybe the heart goes in the other direction. They hear the Sermon and they recognize it as the best possible future for them and for humanity. They hear the Sermon and yearn for the Kingdom of God. They hear the Sermon and recognize in it a call to a better heart, a more pure heart. They are no longer content, then, to remain “more or less the same.”

Let’s note the context for our Lord’s Sermon the Mount. What is going on just before this great sermon? Well, Jesus is healing people. He is healing everyone in sight.

<sup>23</sup>And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people. <sup>24</sup>So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. <sup>25</sup>And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan. (Matthew 4:23, RSV)

So, just before the Sermon the Mount, Jesus has been healing the multitudes of their various diseases and disabilities. Now, in this Sermon, Jesus begins to mend their souls. His goal is that people should have pure hearts. Later in the Sermon Jesus will give examples of such purity. For example, if we belong to Jesus, then we should seek to banish lust (Matthew 5:28) and wrath (Matthew 5:22, 48) from our hearts.

The first Beatitude sets us on the path toward purity of heart. That first Beatitude is a beautiful combination of comfort, on the one hand, and exhortation to purity, on the other. It speaks of the “poor in spirit,” and goes this way:

<sup>3</sup>Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3, KJV)

All of the translations I normally consult use the same words: “the poor in spirit.” Who are these, the “poor in spirit”? Well, if this is a hard season in your life, then you are among them. In one sense, the “poor in spirit” are the discouraged, struggling, exhausted people of this world. So, when Jesus begins to preach his Sermon on the Mount, the first words he speaks are for those who are struggling in life. The first thing on his heart are the downhearted people of earth. He promises them something good. Indeed, he promises them “the kingdom of heaven.” There might not be another sign of hope on the horizon. Things might seem entirely barren to you at some time in life. But if so, if your spirits are feeling downright poor, then know that Jesus has you in mind. He has you under watch and under his care. He pronounces a blessing on you. He speaks of heaven for you. These miserable days will give way to a good eternity. So do not give up. Do not give up on Jesus and do not give up on loving your neighbors. You are blessed even when you are feeling awfully low.

So, that is one meaning for the “poor in spirit.” But in the long history of preaching on this text, there is another meaning for the phrase. It means something along the lines of “godly humility.” To use the words of Micah from our First Lesson, the “poor in spirit” are those who “walk humbly with [their] God” (Micah 6:8). They are not rebels.

The “poor in spirit,” then, do not do what Adam and Eve did. When all was well, and all Adam and Eve had to do was to worship God by refraining from eating of that tree, they did not remain content to be creatures, but strove to become like gods. It would have been better if they had been “poor in spirit.” It would be better for us too to become even more poor in spirit. Let our ambitions rise no higher than to obey Jesus and to walk humbly with him.

St. John Chrysostom believed that the Sermon the Mount begins with commandments under the gentle form of blessings. Each beatitude implies a way of life for those who would gather around Jesus. The parallel is strong between Jesus on the Mount preaching his sermon and Moses on the mount teaching the way of holiness to the people of Israel. That is because the One who taught Moses is now teaching his twelve disciples and anyone in the multitude who cares to listen in. He who is greater than Moses is teaching a new manner of life to his disciples. He who knows the end from the beginning, who knows his intention for humanity and the intention of the Father and the Holy Spirit, in the Sermon the Mount he teaches us.

Again, it begins with our Lord’s blessing on the poor in spirit. This is a blessing that is available to everyone. No one is excluded. Neither the rich nor the poor are left behind in this beatitude. Scholars and blue collar workers are united in this possibility of humility. This humility in the end will lead us to love our neighbors too, since a humble walking with God requires love and humility toward our neighbors too. In a way, the whole sermon is built into this first beatitude – blessed are the poor in spirit – for if we are humble

before God, then we get our lives get back on track. Then we will be more the people our Maker intended us to be. The blessing on the “poor in spirit” means “stop messing things up! You are meant to walk humbly with your God. Do this, then.”

Likewise, with the blessing on those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” This is not a mere observation that the church will include people who desire righteousness in the land. It is that, but it is also a gentle command to us to be such people. To be followers of Jesus means that we ought to “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” I think that all of us who voted this past election and who pray for our President and our land going forward are doing what Jesus wants us to do: we are hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

One of the servants of Jesus in the Old Testament is the prophet Ezekiel. That man preached a fascinating double sermon about a new heart, a pure heart. First off, Ezekiel *exhorts* the people of God to go, fetch themselves a new heart. It is that famous passage about how the LORD does not desire the death of sinners:

<sup>31</sup>Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? <sup>32</sup>For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord GOD; so turn, and live. (Ezekiel 18:31-32, RSV)

In this passage, then, I am especially lifting up the exhortation: “get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.” That is Chapter 18.

Later in the book, Ezekiel again speaks of a new heart, only this time he does not *exhort* the people toward a new heart, but rather *promises* them a new heart. And so we read in Chapter 36:

<sup>26</sup>A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup>And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. (Ezekiel 36:26-27, RSV)

This passage speaks of the LORD doing what the people seem unable to do for themselves: It speaks of a time when it will be possible for human beings to have a new heart.

Now is that time! Even since Jesus established his church and rose from death to accompany his people in the church, it is possible for us to become a

new kind of people in earth: a people with a more pure heart. We have the story of Jesus before us. We can meditate on Jesus and try to bring him to mind more often. We know something of his Spirit and of his ways. Let us walk in those ways.

We have lived long enough in our old ways. It is time to put to an end the old song:

After changes upon changes  
We are more or less the same  
After changes we are  
More or less the same

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Amen! That’s it. That’s all. Let us seek a more pure heart, in Jesus name. Amen.