

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

February 5, 2020 (4th Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A)
Matthew 5:1-12
Micah 6:1-8
1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Children's Message: Have kids stand on their heads—God turns everything upside down.

You know in those old cop movies, when the police have a suspect in custody and they want to interrogate him, and they NEED him to crack to solve the case – what do the detectives DO to INTIMIDATE him? They shine a bright LIGHT in his eyes. Now, that doesn't SEEM like it should WORK, does it? It's just a LIGHT – what's the big deal? But it highlights a TRUTH – there's something ABOUT a LIGHT. It lays us bare. It reveals our secrets. It SHOWS us for who we TRULY are.

All through this season of Epiphany we've been exploring the theme that Jesus is the light of the world. But that light isn't ALWAYS COMFORTABLE. Sometimes he's the light of a BARE bulb, that GLARES and hurts our eyes. He SHOWS us for what we are—TOO often a selfish and mean-spirited people. Jesus' light reveals the ways we fall SHORT of the life God INTENDED for us.

Let me give you an EXAMPLE of what I mean. Patrick was a young pastor right out of seminary, out to change the world. He came to his first congregation with both barrels firing. He was going to help these people get it RIGHT, and get things turned around. He preached about taking faith SERIOUSLY and FINALLY understanding what it REALLY meant to be a Christian. But by the second month, almost everyone in the congregation was ALREADY IRRITATED with him. He talked about grace, but it always came out SOUNDING like law.

One afternoon while visiting Mildred, a shut-in older member, he was grumbling about one of the members of the council. It seemed like NO one in the church was GETTING it, but Donna was ESPECIALLY a thorn in his side.

After listening to him rant and rave about how UN-Christian this woman was, Mildred interrupted him. "Do you know anything ABOUT her?" she asked.

"I know she seems pretty annoying, and hasn't done much to help LEAD the congregation in the couple of months that I've been here."

"Well, Donna is my sister-in-law," said Mildred. "And two weeks before you got here she was diagnosed with cancer, and told that there wasn't much point in doing anything—it was too far advanced. You want her to help YOU out, but right now she's just trying to figure out how to DIE. She's not dead YET, but you might have at least PRETENDED to want to KNOW her."

Humbled, Patrick felt like a fool. After THAT, his preaching CHANGED. His DEMEANOR changed. His PASSION continued, but he did it more out of LOVE for people and LESS out of a need to DOMINATE them. It was only by feeling like a FOOL that Patrick could finally see the WISDOM of GOD.

That's the kind of thing St. Paul was TALKING about: "For GOD'S FOOLISHNESS is WISER than HUMAN WISDOM, and God's WEAKNESS is STRONGER than HUMAN strength."

We have a God that turns EVERYTHING UPSIDE down, on its HEAD. God always breaks our expectations. "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters," Paul said, "not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But 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, things that are NOT, to reduce to NOTHING things that ARE." Reversals.

Consider the cross: the idea that our REDEMPTION could come through a public EXECUTION, that the POWER of God would be demonstrated by DYING, it's RIDICULOUS. The other religions of the world have TROUBLE with this, the idea that God would even STOOP so low as to become HUMAN, much less DIE a human DEATH. The Greek word translated here as "foolishness" is *skandalon*, as in SCANDAL. "The message about the cross is FOOLISHNESS (SCANDALOUS) to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the POWER of God." GOD'S reversals.

The theologian Robert Capon wrote this:

We crucified Jesus, not because he was God, but because he BLASPHEMED: He claimed to be God and then FAILED to come up to OUR standards for ASSESSING the claim. It's not that we weren't looking for the Messiah; it's just that HE wasn't what we were looking FOR.

(show slide Superman Jesus.)

Man, JC was RIPPED!

Capon didn't print this, but the fact that it's so easy to FIND pictures like this on the internet proves his point. THIS is what we WANT.

Capon continued:

OUR kind of Messiah would come DOWN from a cross. He would carry a folding phone booth in his back pocket. He wouldn't do a STUPID thing like rising from the dead. He would do a SMART thing like NEVER dying. [Hunting the Divine Fox, p. 91]

But BY dying on that cross, Jesus turned the world on its head. The WEAKEST thing there is in our world is to die, but the most POWERFUL thing that JESUS did, the most powerful thing he COULD'VE done, was to die. And not just ANY death; he died a CRIMINAL'S death, a HUMILIATING death. Christ's weakness COULD have been the END of Christianity, but it WAS the beginning. His weakness COULD have proved that he WASN'T the Messiah, but instead it proved that he WAS the Messiah.

Because, as FOOLISH and SCANDALOUS as a CROSS is, in THIS cross, there's LIFE, and there's POWER, because it's HIS cross.

(show slide Crown of Thorns Cannon.)

In Jesus, God COMES to US IN our WEAKNESS, because WE don't have the STRENGTH to come to GOD. We have a Lord that made HIMSELF WEAK so that WE could be STRONG, who DIED so that WE could live, who walks WITH us IN our lives.

So, is it any wonder then that our Lord's BEATITUDES turn the world on its head too? The Kingdom of God REVERSES what's WRONG with this world. Those who have no reason to HOPE in this world will be GIVEN hope. Those who have no reason for JOY in this world will be COMFORTED. Those who are WEAK in this world will be GIVEN STRENGTH. The light of JESUS REVEALS GOD'S REVERSALS. These LEAST in the kingdom, the poor in spirit, the mourning, the weak, the ones hungering and thirsting for a better world, THESE will RECEIVE BLESSING in the kingdom of God. The light of the Son will SHINE on those who are so OFTEN OVERSHADOWED in DARKNESS. And that's just the first 4 beatitudes.

And the OTHER beatitudes? Well, HOW do you suppose God's light GETS to those people? Go back to Micah:

"Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,

with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"
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?"

GOD'S reversals. God's not INTERESTED in OUR ways; God's ONLY interested in KINGDOM values.

The REST of the Beattitudes FOCUS that light on US. "Blessed are the merciful." "Blessed are the pure in heart." "Blessed are the peacemakers." What I'm saying to you, brothers and sisters, is that YOU are the ones that BRING light to those in darkness. YOU are. YOU are the WAY God BLESSES people.

"Consider your own call, brothers and sisters," Paul said, "not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful." No kidding. God USES someone as WEAK as ME? How about THAT for FOOLISHNESS? God USES SINNERS like US? How about THAT for SCANDAL? But THAT'S WHAT GOD DOES!

Again and again, scripture SHOWS us how God FLIPS the world on its head. JESUS TURNS the world UPSIDE down.

So, as Jesus' DISCIPLES ... don't be SURPRISED if Jesus asks you to DO something COMPLETELY unexpected. He'll THROW you for a LOOP.

But don't worry; you're in good COMPANY. Because, according to Jesus, the Kingdom of God is FILLED with people who have NO IDEA what they're doing. But DO know (*look at the picture*) what LOVE LOOKS like. And that's enough. Amen.