

What Would Jesus Tweet?

Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on January 29, 2017]

I

In case you haven't heard, we have a new president.

His name is Donald Trump and he is now ten days in office.

Our new president loves to communicate via Twitter.

With the tap of his finger, President Trump can send his 22 million followers a "tweet" to let them know his current thinking on any issue.

As you know (unless you have been living on another planet for the last 10 years), Twitter is a social networking platform that allows instant short message communication in 140 characters or less.

Twitter was founded in March 2006 and today has over 313 million users and over 1 billion unique visits each month.

How many of you are on Twitter?

By comparison, how many are on Facebook?

Facebook is much bigger,
with almost 1.8 billion users,
but the impact of Twitter is,
as Donald Trump would say, **yuge**.

On Election Day, November 8, Twitter was the largest single source of breaking news, with 40 million tweets sent by 10 p.m., Eastern Time.

Needless to say, Donald Trump loves Twitter.

One of the big questions right after the election was,
would he give it up once he became president?

Obviously, the answer is “no.”

Whether or not governing the nation by way of Twitter is a wise strategy remains to be seen.

But there can be no doubt that Mr. Trump’s use of Twitter has revolutionized the political process.

II

As I thought about Donald Trump’s tweeting tendencies
(how’s that for alliteration?),
I also thought, “**What would Jesus tweet?**”

While there were no computers, no internet, no Facebook or Twitter in the time of Jesus, there was the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament.

One might consider the Book of Proverbs,
consisting mostly of short, pithy sayings designed to challenge and inspire,
as the first repository of tweets in world history.

Many of the proverbs come in at 140 characters or less

One of my favorite texts from Proverbs is found in Proverbs 3:5-6:

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*

That’s 113 characters, by the way.

We might also look to the sayings of the Hebrew prophets,

who challenged the conventional wisdom of their day,
 sought to rouse God's people out of their comfortable complacency,
 and never hesitated to speak truth to power.

One of the classic examples is found in today's OT reading, Micah 6:1-8, where Micah sums up his prophetic message, saying,

*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.*

That's 116 characters.

And when we turn to the New Testament, we find today's gospel reading, Matthew 5:1-12,

a series of nine sayings we call The Beatitudes
 (from the Latin word for "blessed")
 which easily fit within the framework of 140 characters.

If Jesus had had Twitter, these are the sayings that he would tweet.

And therein lies an important and urgent message for each of us,
 for the Christian church,
 for our nation at the beginning of a new administration,
 and especially for he who,
 with the help of Twitter,
 ascended to the highest office in the land.

III

The story is told that the great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard heard the Beatitudes read at worship one Sunday morning and later at dinner he asked,
 "Why did no one laugh? Was no one listening?"

Kierkegaard's sardonic question was intended to lift up the truth of these nine conditions that Jesus calls "blessed."

For the fact is none of them are considered so by the world at large,
 either in Jesus' day or in our own.

For what is blessed about being poor—
 whether abject poverty or poverty of spirit?

What is blessed about being in mourning or meek,
 especially in a world that is divided between winners and losers,
 a world that believes only the strong survive?

What is blessed about being hungry or thirsty?—
 much less hungering or thirsting for righteousness,
 which is a thankless and lonely reality in our contemporary world.

And what is blessed about being merciful?

Mercy, if valued at all, is more often than not seen as an ideal rather than a
 practice.

And as for peacemaking, genuine peacemaking—
 not a peace enforced at the point of a gun (or a vote, for that matter).

Real peacemaking is hard and frustrating, and often futile work, and frequently
 will lead you to be mocked, called overly idealistic, unrealistic, a bleeding-heart
 liberal, unpatriotic, or worse.

Try being a true peacemaker and you will soon know what being persecuted for
 righteousness' sake is all about.

No wonder Kierkegaard expected laughter.

He knew that these nine sayings of Jesus,
 these Jesus tweets,
 are in our modern world simply laughable.

And since he heard no one laugh, he assumed either no one was listening or had
 dropped into a pious fog born of traditional approaches to this text,

interpretations that say more about the history and development of the Christian church than they do about the Beatitudes themselves.

IV

One view of the Beatitudes is that they are Jesus' "absolute demand."

In other words, Jesus is setting before his followers a perfectionist ideal that they should earnestly strive toward throughout their lives.

But the Beatitudes, whatever else they are, are not a set of nine human ideals.

Nor are they moral norms for a new society, exhortations that, if achieved, then the blessings of heaven will follow.

Jesus is not describing nine different kinds of behavior that will make us healthy, wealthy, and wise and get us to heaven.

Another traditional interpretation calls the Beatitudes "impossible ideals," designed to drive us to our knees pleading "Lord, have mercy."

I suspect that was the general school of thought in the Danish Lutheran church of Kierkegaard's day.

But, in fact, the Beatitudes are not impossible at all.

Countless men and women have and continue to hunger and thirst for righteousness,

offer mercy rather than wrath,

devote themselves to seeking and following God,

and give themselves to the cause of peace using Christ's
methods rather than the world's.

To suggest this kind of life is impossible would be to mock the saints, from the first disciples, to Saint Francis, Gandhi, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bishop Oscar Romero, Pope John Paul II and countless anonymous saints throughout the years who have and continue to give their lives to eradicating hunger, poverty, sickness, and conflict in the world.

A third suggestion is the notion that the Beatitudes are Jesus' interim ethic.

Rather than intended to be a long term program, this is the behavior he demands of his followers until the kingdom breaks in with all its fullness.

According to this thinking, Jesus is announcing one last opportunity for a "heroic moral effort" on the part of people before the catastrophic end of time, judgment, and the coming of a new world, an effort which will be rewarded in the world to come.

V

The scholarly consensus today is that none of these historic approaches to the Beatitudes do them justice.

The Beatitudes are not Jesus' rules for the new ordering of society,
 not spoken to drive us into the arms of his mercy,
 nor even Jesus' demands for the behavior of any who would follow
 him until his kingdom comes.

Jesus is not saying "You ought to be poor in spirit,"
 "You ought to be meek,"
 "you ought to work for peace," etc.

Nor is he calling us to intentionally become victims or doormats as a condition of following him.

Jesus is speaking to people already following him.

Greek scholars tell us that Jesus' language here is not in the imperative, but the indicative.

Which means the Beatitudes are not commands or instructions,
 but statements of fact,
 declarations of the alternative reality of God's kingdom.

They are words of hope to those who are already in the conditions Jesus describes,

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy—now!”

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God—now!”

As we saw last week, Jesus’ ministry begins with the proclamation that God’s kingdom is at hand.

When Christ’s disciples reveal that kingdom through word and example, they start to realize the promise of the Beatitudes:

they obtain mercy,
they find God among the poor and the dispossessed
they live under God’s reign.

Like Jesus, we need to craft new messages of hope.

Blessed are the anxious and the depressed;
the God who feeds the birds of the air will care for their every need.

Blessed are those who destroy the lives of others;
they know not what they do and they shall be forgiven.

Blessed are the refugees who face insurmountable obstacles in the pursuit of a new life;
they will find hope.

Blessed are children traumatized by war;
they will play in the streets once again.

Blessed are those defeated by economic injustice;
they will find plenty on God’s holy mountain.

Words like these will shock the world out of its despair
and turn our hearts once again to dreams of hope and peace.

VI

Right now dreams of hope and peace are needed more than ever.

Donald Trump ran for the presidency making audacious promises, especially with respect to immigration—

he was going to deport all undocumented immigrants
and build a wall along the US/Mexico border to keep them out.

But as Christians following the One who said, “Blessed are the merciful,” we have to ask, what would a merciful immigration policy look like?

Would it put massive resources—25-30 billion dollars according to some estimates—into building a wall?

Or would it put some of those resources into improving life on both sides of the border so those on one side would not feel compelled to leave their nation and come to ours in search of a better life in the first place?

And what about the 10-12 million undocumented immigrants who are already here? What would a merciful immigration policy look like for them—
many of whom have lived here 10, 15, 20 or more years, and are paying taxes, building businesses, contributing to their communities, and this is their home?

And when Jesus said, “blessed are the peacemakers,” we have to ask, what does it do to the cause of peacemaking in the world, and specifically in the Middle East, for our new president, on just his second day in office, to say to officers of the CIA that we should have taken Iraq’s oil, and may still get a chance to do so?

We currently have over 5000 of our American troops in Iraq working hand in hand with the Iraqi military to defeat ISIS and recapture territory from ISIS.

Does our new president’s statement last Saturday put those men and women at greater risk and damage the cause of peace in that troubled region?

And what about President Trump’s executive order on Friday afternoon banning immigration from seven Muslim countries and suspending the admission of refugees into our country?

Where is the mercy in this policy for those long-suffering families who have already gone through the long, arduous process of being approved for relocation to the U.S., some of whom were detained at airports Friday night?

And where is the mercy for legal residents, those already holding green cards;
 for naturalized citizens who now are unable for their families to visit them;
 and for foreign students from those seven nations?

A Cato Institute study points out that the average likelihood of an American being killed in a terrorist attack in which any type of immigrant participates is 1 in 3.6 billion.

What will be the long term impact of this action on our attempts to, as Mr. Trump said in his inaugural address, drive terrorism from the face of the earth?

Denying refuge to desperate people will certainly lead to greater suffering, misery, and death.

Will it also provide a recruiting bonanza for terrorist groups like ISIS, Al Qaeda and others?

VII

My friends, these are some of the questions the Beatitudes force us to ask, not just of ourselves but also of the leadership of the nation we are a part of.

The Beatitudes are a reminder to us of whose side God is on.

Whenever we build walls—
 whether literal or metaphorical—
 to separate ourselves from one another,
 as Christians we must ask—
 “Which side of the wall is Jesus on?”

For Jesus can always be found on the side where there is the greatest need.

Jesus is on the side of the meek,
 the poor in spirit,

those who mourn,
 those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
 those who pursue peace,
 those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

And we Christians must decide whose side we are on.

Will we passively accept the actions of a government that will cause untold suffering to the weakest and most vulnerable citizens of this planet?

Or, will we use our rights as citizens of this great land to write letters, make phone calls, hold our elected officials, including the new administration, accountable, and, if necessary, do as my wife and millions of others did last Saturday—get out and march?

At his Nobel Peace Prize ceremony Elie Wiesel said:

“There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.”

The Beatitudes are not just blessings but a call to action for the sake of creating the world God imagines.

And in the season of Epiphany, the Beatitudes point out who Jesus really is.

Perhaps not the Jesus we want.

Perhaps the Jesus who likely rubs us the wrong way.

Perhaps the Jesus who tells us the truth about ourselves.

The Beatitudes are a call to be the church, to make Jesus present and visible and manifest when the world tries desperately to silence those who speak the truth.

In these troubled days, we need this reminder,
 especially when our imagination may be limited...
 when our hope for the future is dimmed...
 when we think what we do and what we say and what we believe does not matter.

Our hunger and thirst for righteousness matters.

Our sometimes feeble attempts to do justice,
to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with our God
do make a difference.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

"Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power, and with its plea for the weak. Christians are doing too little to make these points clear rather than too much. Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more, than they are doing now. Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak rather than considering first the possible right of the strong."

So whose Tweets will it be: The Donald or Jesus?

You may not feel like laughing right now.

Are you listening?

Amen.

Sources:

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