

A Small Sermon on the Mount
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Cynicism is a terrible disease. I've certainly been afflicted with it. Perhaps you have as well. Its symptoms are legion. It stifles hope. It hobbles creativity. It depresses talent. It knows no particular season like the flu. We're always susceptible to a case of cynicism—mild to severe.

I could tell I was coming down with a pretty good case of it earlier this week. I found myself at a mandatory retreat for clergy in the Diocese. They don't CALL it mandatory, but you kind of get the impression you have to show up. There was literally no part of me that wanted to go. I wanted to be here at St. Mark's—planning Lent; writing grants; clearing my office; working on the annual meeting. But it was politically and socially important that I attend, so I drove down to a retreat center in Racine—full of eye rolls, side comments and a settled belief—before I had even arrived—that I would get nothing out of this experience. In other words; I had a moderate case of cynicism, and it was quickly becoming severe.

I shook the hands I was supposed to shake; I said the things I was supposed to say; I answered a bunch of emails. Then I dragged myself to the chapel to say Evening Prayer with the other priests, because I frankly didn't think I could get away with skipping it.

There we sat, in a simple chapel, with our prayer books open. And we began to pray. And God did what God tends to do, which is to give us healing when we need it. As the familiar words of our Evening Prayers began to roll over me, I started to be healed. My cynicism began to abate, and a sense of perspective, a sense of the Divine, settled on my shoulders. I began to breathe deeper.

Right at that moment, I experienced one of the most beautiful things I've experienced in a long time. In the middle of Evening Prayer, there's a place of silence where people are invited to offer their own prayers to God—kind of free form. And all these priests and deacons began to pray for people in their congregation by name. *God, please be with Barbara; bless Wesley; strengthen Tim and Anna. God, please bring healing to Richard.* The room was filled with the names of people who were in pain, who were sick, who were in need. And I saw that all these clergy had carried the cares and concerns of all the little parishes in this whole diocese into that chapel. And these faithful pastors offered these prayers to God. It was a gorgeous sound—the names of the people of God in need being spoken by the servants of God.

God has a way of healing those jagged, blind, silly, cynical parts of us so that we can experience what is true, what is important. It's hard to roll your eyes when you are deep in prayer. Cynicism is simply hopelessness repackaged for a modern sensibility. Cynicism tells us that things are exactly as they have always been and WILL always be. Hope—radical and unexpected hope—tells us that things will indeed be different with the help of God.

I think the Sermon on the Mount—the most famous part of which we hear in the Gospel this morning—is God’s medicine, attempting to heal us of all the sins that cling so closely—cynicism, illusion, self-righteousness, cruelty. God brings the medicine, my friends. Words like mercy, comfort, justice, peacemakers—these pepper our readings today like balms for wounded spirits.

And the wounds around here are deep. In our nation. In our city. In our communities. In our homes. I look around and I see anxiety about the future. I see a newly-acceptable malice toward those of different religions, different nationalities, different customs. I see a callous disregard toward the refugee and a foul, monstrous, jingoistic nationalism strangling our public discourse.

And God seems to be saying—through Micah and through Matthew—that in even the worst of these situations, where despair seems appropriate and where the cynical disregard for brothers and sisters in need reign—even in these times, God is faithful. God brings healing. God wills love, mercy, compassion, justice and succor. These medicines are God’s delight. And we will remember their power when we are in prayer.

I wish I could say that God heals us simply because it is God’s delight to do so. This is only partly the case. God heals so that we can go into the world and do likewise. When we are shown a vision of heaven, it is our duty to go and show it to others. When we are shown the power of mercy, compassion, peace and fidelity, it is our duty to go and show it to others. When we are healed, we go and heal. That is how our citizenship in the empire of God operates. We enjoy the benefits of belonging, and our response to these benefits is to seek out the neighbor and be Jesus for them.

Don’t be cynical. Be a people of hope. Resist what is evil. Savor what is good. Hug your kids. Love your friends. Say your prayers. Listen to the voice of Jesus preaching from the mountain:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

I know it can seem bleak. And I know that it is so easy to ignore the world, to disengage from the world, to even roll our eyes a bit at the world. That’s just the fever talking. Come to the font and be healed. Come to the table and be healed. Come to prayer and be healed. Then get out there and heal the sickness you see. Amen.