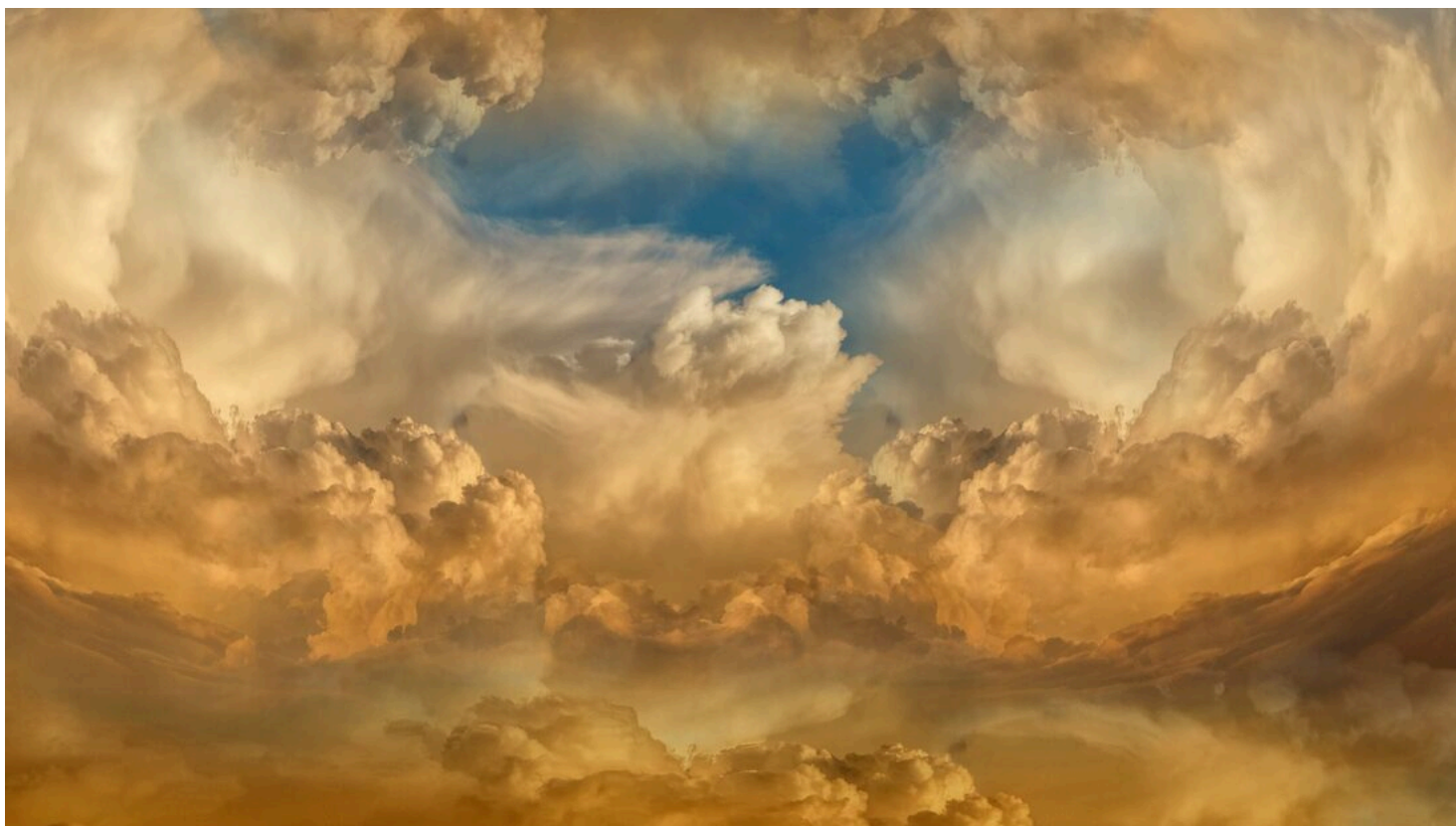


We Long to Be More Than We Can Be on Our Own

8/18/2024

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:
Matthew 5:1–12

This morning I'm continuing with my closing "fundamentals" of Christianity sermon series. We began two weeks ago with opportunity and repentance. And we discovered that repentance isn't about feeling guilty to avoid a bad ending in hell. It's about seizing the always present but always somewhat elusive opportunity to realign myself and my values with the Kingdom of God. And what does that look like exactly?

We answered that question last week. It looks like love and justice. And we discussed that there can be no such thing as a relationship with God, or a Kingdom of Heaven, or salvation without love (and the public form of love) justice. Jesus taught us so much about love and right relationships because they are the way that salvation becomes real in the world. We must not put grace so far ahead of works that our actions in this world become irrelevant. We are saved by love not when we receive it,

but when we emulate it. When we act upon it. That's when it becomes real, instead of potential.

So, then, Pastor Jeff, you must be saying that this total realignment of my values with the Kingdom of God and the taking up of my cross to remake the world in the image of love, these are things that *I* can achieve, right? If I just get up off the couch, and wash my face and comb my hair, and pull myself up by my bootstraps, and *carpe diem*, and read *The Purpose Driven Life*, and work my fingers to the bone, and run myself ragged, then I—I and I alone—through my action can transform myself, love the world, fight for justice, and fulfill my greatest calling and God-given destiny? Right? It's all up to me, and I have the power!

NO. There's a critical piece of the equation that's missing. And if we don't get to it, everything goes bad. Everything gets corrupted. It's called grace. Grace is pretty simple to understand: Human beings are capable of doing a lot of things. But there is one thing within us—that dream, that greatest hope, so big we can barely articulate it, that deep longing for something more (for meaning and purpose and enlightenment and utopia and salvation), that hope for a world that is totally aligned to goodness and love and justice, that greatest destiny within us hungering to get out into the world--*that* we cannot achieve on our own, under our own power. And if we try? It's gonna go bad.

On our own, we may be able to conquer the universe. And yet what we know to be true as Christians is that even that great achievement—accomplished up in the stars by descendants who will be so different from us that they'll seem like gods to us—it will not satisfy them, will not satisfy us. We long for something that is more than us and more than we could ever become on our own. Are we doomed then? No, there's hope because there is a power that we have access to that can help us. It's God's power. It's bigger than us, beyond us, and it's given to us freely. We call this grace.

Some Christians talk a lot about the total depravity of the human condition. Oi. I find that to be pessimistic, indulgent, and counterproductive. It's a way of trying to force us, through guilt and negativity, to pay attention to grace. But I think it's led to a backlash against grace and God's power because it simply isn't true. We're not all bad. We're not! In fact, Christianity affirms everything that is good in humanity and in the world. The body is good, sexuality is good, culture is good, art and music and community are good. There is much that is good in us and in the world, and we should pay attention to it, work for it, learn from it all.

It's not that we're bad, it's simply that we're incomplete. We're unfinished. We're a work in progress. That's all. And the power or the destiny that is shaping what we will become in the next world is not our own. The power that puts that deep longing for something more within us is a power that is not totally us. It is beyond us, it's God's power. So, whatever ideas we come up with on our own to be more than human—to start putting computers in our heads, to replace ourselves with AI, to go back to nature, to travel to the stars, to perfect our genes with crisper—whatever it is, it's not going to truly satisfy or perfect us.

And, in fact, when everybody has a computer in their brain and three arms and we're all living on Mars, unless those transformations have been guided by the power of grace rather than human power, then things could go very badly for us. It could be a far worse future that we enact for ourselves. And even if that future world would appear to us to be a utopia—a demonstrably much better world by every metric—the people living in it would not necessarily be any closer than we are to our true human destiny because that requires something more than even our wildest sci-fi, utopian fantasies can provide.

So, what's required? I mean, isn't the whole thing about grace that it's freely given? So don't we then have it? Yes, it's freely given and accessible to all, and yet in order for this greatest power to have any power, I must act to align myself to it. And so if you've really been paying attention, you see that we're now circling back around to the first sermon in this series on opportunity and repentance and aligning myself totally to the Kingdom of God. But let's explore this from a slightly different angle this time around.

The sermon on the mount, which we heard read this morning, is a universal sermon. What I mean by that is this: Jesus addresses this sermon to a very specific audience of poor, displaced, disenfranchised, struggling people. And yet, Jesus was not only speaking to marginalized people, he is speaking to all of us. Jesus was addressing the poor, but he was addressing them about the poverty of the human condition, which is true for all of us. No matter how rich, how powerful, how comfortable we may be, none of us can ever escape the fact that the sermon on the mount addresses me and the humbleness of our human condition. But Jesus tells this meekness, this hunger, this mourning, this spiritual poverty is our blessing. Why? How could this be?

It's our blessing because it is the way of disassociating ourselves from self-power and realigning ourselves to God's grace and God's power. The way I understand him, Jesus believed that the poor and the marginalized had a spiritual advantage over the rich and the powerful. The poor were closer to the Kingdom of God than the rich and the powerful because the experience of worldly poverty (which is an evil thing, and unjust) had put them in greater touch with their spiritual poverty and encouraged them to ultimately rely on God's power and grace.

Another example of this might be addicts in recovery. The first three steps in the 12 steps are these: 1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable. 2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. 3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him. It's exactly what we're talking about. And this isn't just true for addicts. It's true for everybody! But addicts, if they want to survive, have to rapidly get over the idea that we human beings can ultimately save ourselves and transform ourselves without a power that is truly greater than and beyond us. Jesus recognizes that those who are suffering the most have often come to this great realization while many of us who are well-to-do and comfortable are still able to labor falsely under the illusion that we can save ourselves.

Are you ready for one final twist? Self-power ultimately always fails. It always falls short. And it is ever

susceptible to corruption and to gross error. So self-power can never cross the finish line on its own. However, that doesn't mean that self-power can never do anything good. In fact, through self-power alone you can become a better, happier, more productive, more loving person than you are now. And, in fact, a little ego building is healthy for us, and natural. That's why my message to the children this morning was a little different than my message to you now. I told them first to try their best. Because we need a little ego and a little self-power to grow up. And part of growing up is growing in power. And so Jesus tells us that the next part of growing up is growing in power to the point of discovering that our power is insufficient and only God's power can ultimately transform and fulfill us. A child, as Jesus points out more than once, is naturally aligned with God, not yet having grown into power. But an adult must eventually make a choice. Will I choose to continue to try to fulfill myself? Or will I allow myself to be become like a little child again and be fulfilled by the power which is greater than myself?

So, here's the three fundamentals so far: Now is the time to repent (to change myself) by realigning myself totally with the values of the Kingdom of God. The values of the Kingdom of God can only be understood through love (and justice). Aligning ourselves to the Kingdom of God means acting out love and justice in our lives and in our world. If we act out our vision for love and justice and a brighter future through our own human power alone, we will never be able to achieve the total transformation we long for. And as works in progress, we will always be in danger of corruption and gross error. And so, one of the most important ways we must align ourselves to the values of the Kingdom of God and one of the most important ways we can express love and make justice is by outgrowing the desire to save ourselves and the world by our own power. As we naturally realize and learn the limitations of our own human potential, we discover that the true potential is that which was always there within us from the very beginning—God's potential within us, given to us freely by grace. So to allow that grace and that power to take total control, we must (as Howard Thurman put it) yield the nerve center of our consent totally to God by embracing the fundamental humbleness, meekness, and poverty at the very center of our human condition.

Next week, we're going to ask then, what does the future really look like? What is God's plan for us? What might it look like when we're no longer works in progress? Next week we'll be discussing my final fundamental, resurrection and rebirth.

In the meantime, let Jesus' sermon on the mount allow you to loosen your grip on the idea that you must ultimately help yourself, save yourself, fix the world through your power alone. And ask yourself: Do I believe I have to save myself and fix everything all on my own? Do I act like I have to save myself and fix everything all on my own? What is it that I truly long for? And how can accepting my own imperfect humanity help me become what I most long to be? And remember: As Saint Irenaeus put it, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." By grace, may we all come fully alive. Amen.