

“Groundhog Jesus OR Functional Atheism” **Matthew 5:1-12**

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston WV 4th Sunday after Epiphany [February 2,] 2014

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ ‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Well, good morning. Sometimes changes bring about good things or bad things. Sometimes changes bring about unexpected things.

We have a new piece of computer software here at Saint Marks, to which I am grateful to Pat Gallagher for making the introduction. It’s going to make it easier (now that it’s finally set up, not so easy setting it up) to stay in contact with the members and friends of Saint Marks.

Tomorrow the February ReMarker/newsletter will be sent out by this – a one page email. If there are parts you want to read, you click on a link and it almost instantaneously pops up on your screen. If there are parts that don’t interest you at that particular moment, you can simply skip them.

As a test run of the software, yesterday, I sent out a short mailing announcing what we are doing here in Saint Marks today. 46% of the people getting the email opened it (including Jeremy Jones – at 1:00 a.m., now in Texas, after a long day traveling from here.)

There’s also a link on this where you can “click” and send a response to the church.

Here's where the unexpected developments came. Here's where I had to re-work my sermon. From our former Bishop, S. Clifton Ives, I heard:

Thanks for celebrating my favorite holiday. The groundhog is always correct. Every year on February 2nd she says "it is six more weeks of winter or six more weeks until Spring". She comes out to remind us that light has come back, that darkness will never overcome it. When patiently freed from fears, anxiety, and guilt we too can come out of our holes, walk in the light, and let the Son shine in. ...

What powerful metaphor! Being *freed from fears, anxiety, and guilt ... coming out of our holes, walking in the light, and letting Jesus shine through us!*

That's not exactly the message I was going to make about Groundhog Day. But, after having heard it, I couldn't ignore it. That IS good news; that IS the Gospel.

And, if one Bishop weren't enough interference into my sermon preparation, then came another Bishop – William Boyd Grove. I got the link to where I could watch the recording of a “groundhog day—of sorts” sermon that he preached a week ago. It was the funeral homily for Bishop Jack Tuell. His text was from the 5th chapter of Acts, where is described how people would come, or come bringing loved ones, to sit alongside the road, in hopes that the shadow of Peter, the Apostle, would fall upon them. From that text, Bishop Grove went forward to talk eloquently about the power that bishop Tuell – and each of us – has in our mere shadow.

It's not just Punxatawney Phil, or French Creek Freddie, whose shadow has incredible power.

When Jesus shines through our lives, when we walk with one foot in this world of fives senses, and one foot in the Kingdom of God, an incredible power – and sometimes even unknown to us – transfers to those in their/our shadow.

That being said, and at the risk of it undermining what is to follow, let me turn now to what I thought Jesus wanted me to tell you this morning.

We sang hymns of praise to begin our worship: “His Name is Wonderful!” and “Majesty, Worship his Majesty.” You sang them with gusto and great heartfelt praise. Then just a few minutes ago, you sang “Joy to the World; It’s Groundhog Day” and “Groundhog Day!” (to the tune of “Angels We Have Heard on High!” – with all those great choral runs.) And, I’ve got to admit – you sang both of them with at least as much heartfelt praise and gusto.

It makes me wonder – and I did wonder this before I heard you sing – have we gotten to the place in contemporary worship where the case can be made that THE GROUNDHOG occupies a place of value akin to that of Jesus?

Let me make my case. If Jesus is reduced to merely (and it surely is important; I don’t mean to demean it too much by saying “merely”) ... If Jesus is reduced to merely telling us that we are beloved children of God precious and beautiful to behold ... AND ... we hold onto him like a “get out of hell free” card ... BUT ... that is pretty much the extent of the story ... then have we reduced Jesus to the level of the Groundhog and we practice what is called FUNCTIONAL ATHEISM in our living.

“Functional Atheism” is where we profess with our lips a belief in Jesus, but our lives show that this professed belief doesn’t make any real difference.

Well – I know that this overstates the case. But Jesus also used hyperbole to get people’s attention, as well. (Take the LOG out of your eye before you take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.)

The Beatitudes (and the rest of the sermon on the mount, which we will continue looking at in the next couple weeks) are Jesus’ yardstick for answering this question.

The question is: **WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN MAKE IN YOUR LIFE?**

Other than some charitable giving and behavior akin to membership in a local civic club, **WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES JESUS MAKE?**

Just quickly, look at the first Beatitude: ***Blessed are the poor in spirit.*** That does not mean: “***Blessed are those who flunked the spirituality class.***” It’s akin to something like: ***blessed are those who are content with what they have and do not go hankering after more and more stuff thinking that it will make them happy or content.***

A friend of mine put it this way: ***Whenever I am out and about and I run into something calling my name to buy, I look at it, look at its price, divide the price by \$10, and ask myself if buying that particular thing would bring me as much satisfaction as saving the number of lives I calculated is its price divided by \$10.***

I don’t throw that in as a gratuitous plug for what we are doing with the Imagine No Malaria campaign. THIS is what “blessed are the poor in spirit” is about.

It may seem that many of these “blessed”s seem like un-blessing. That is the extent to which we are practicing FUNCTIONAL ATHEISM in our living. We don’t even know just how good it is to follow Jesus’ blessings.

Author Brian D. McLaren put it like this:

... the word that best characterizes Christian faith is vulnerability....

Jesus said he did not come to bring peace but a sword. He spoke families being divided because of him and his message. Think of like this: If you are the child of white racist parents. One day you come home and say, “As a follower of Christ, I think we should love black Americans, and Hispanics.” Well, as a peacemaker in the way of Christ, you have just created division, not peace.

Imagine you are a corporate executive in a board meeting. You say in a board meeting: I would like to reduce our profit margin over the next ten years and so that we can lead the industry in creating rec-cyclable products. So we minimize damage to God’s earth and we act as proper stewards of God’s creation. As a follower of Christ, you will create division.

Imagine you are a leader in a political party that prospers. Again, like man, organizations that need to raise funds by making people feel afraid of rivals. You write a memo that says, “We need to treat our opponents exactly as we “would like to

be treated. We need to speak truly not only free of lies, but also of exaggeration. Our “yes” must be “yes,” and our “no” must be “no.” Even if they slander us, we must not return insult for insult. In fact, we must do good to our opponents. In the name of peace, you will, in all likelihood, experience a sword, and in all likelihood that sword will cut short your political tenure.¹

Look at each of these Beatitudes. How much do they describe *not just* what you are doing, but what you actually believe is valuable, and what you want to do with your life?

Here’s the deal. All of us here, preacher included, have some growing to do. It’s a good thing to know that we ARE beloved children of God, precious and beautiful to behold. BUT God’s not done with us yet. And Jesus’ recipe in these Beatitudes are NOT to put us into a straight jacket; rather they are to show us what abundant life really looks like.

Are you willing to keep on growing? Are you willing to keep on getting closer to the Kingdom of Heaven – on earth in this life?

Then let’s hold hands and keep on going together. It’s a good journey.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

¹ Brian D. McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, chapter 20