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# Mountaintop Mentalities

## Matthew 5:1-12

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 2, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke Powery

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Jesus talks a lot in the book of Matthew. Just check out all of the red-letter editions of the Bible. But this shouldn't be surprising because he is the Word of God. In fact, he talks more in Matthew than in any other gospel. God is a God who speaks. As Karl Barth says, *Deus dixit*, God speaks, and Jesus proves this. There are five discourses by Jesus in this gospel, perhaps representing the five books of the Torah, the Jewish law, and at the end of each discourse, there is the same linguistic formula, "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things..." (7:28-29). Jesus says a lot in the book of Matthew. This morning we have part of the first discourse. It's been called "the sermon on the mount." The biblical text never calls it a sermon, literally, but it is oral teaching. It may even be considered a sermon that has never grown old in the Church.

Maybe you remember a sermon from your childhood that still resonates in your memory; that one word or one image or turn of phrase or story. Whatever it is, the sermon seems to never grow old. But the same can't be said of many other sermons because some have grown stale and sour, have been forgotten, and perhaps should have never been preached. Sermons that were pronounced dead before they even entered the pulpit and were proclaimed. Do I have any witnesses here this morning? Can I get a witness that there have been some sermons that you wished you would have never heard in your life? Sermons, as I have heard, about satellites and orbits (I'm still in the twilight zone about that one!); no wonder that sermon never hit the ground and dealt with humanity. People may have good reasons to say like poet Edgar Guest, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day."

But this sermon by Jesus has never grown old. The sermon on the mount has had a huge hearing throughout the centuries. St. Augustine calls it "a perfect standard of the Christian life." There is a theological resonance and rhetorical substance that draws the great crowds that follow Jesus in the ancient middle east. He struck them as "one having authority" greater than their scribes. When Jesus "saw the crowds, he went up the mountain" and sat down and began to teach.

The "mountain" may be nothing more than "the mountain region" or "the hill country," west of the sea of Galilee. And Jesus assumes the pedagogical posture of the day by sitting down to expound scripture and life. But keep in mind that as one commentator notes, "In the ancient Near East, mountains were considered the homes of the gods and sacred sites. In Exodus... the Torah is revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. Just as Moses received God's commandments on Sinai, Jesus reveals God's will on the mountain" (Daniel Harrington). In Matthew, think about all of the other events in Jesus' life that took place on mountains—his temptation (4:8-10), the feeding of the four thousand (15:29-39), his transfiguration (17:1-9), his arrest (26:30-35), and his final commission (28:16). All on mountains.

In many eastern cultures, many did not venture to the place of the gods, the peak of the mountain, because it was viewed as too holy for human presence. Rather they would circle the base of the mountain. But here we have the disciples with Jesus on the mountain as the crowds hear him as well. Throughout the ages, people have also taken pilgrimages to the top of mountains like Mount Sinai or Mount Everest or Mount Kilimanjaro or the Himalayas. They've been less hesitant about being too close to its sacredness, reaching the soaring peak as if reaching God at last or at least being closer to God. Higher in the heavens thus somehow closer to the Holy and holiness.

Moving up in the world, climbing Jacob's ladder, going higher and higher. Everybody wants to go up not down—in their careers, in their education, in their knowledge, in their economic standing-- because we think it is at the mountaintop where we encounter God. God must be above our world. Thus, the peak is our preference. We have heard “climb every mountain” in our culture but Jesus never tells us to do this.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. gave what was to be his final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” He says that God “allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!” On the mountaintop, he was given insight and a different perspective on life but even with that, he didn’t stay on the mountain. He found himself fighting on behalf of sanitation workers in Memphis, TN, as part of the Poor People’s Campaign and eventually was shot to death on a balcony at the Lorraine Motel.

Jesus may go up mountains but he doesn’t stay there. He always comes down. We may want to be at the top of our game or the top of Christian ministry expressed through the building of mega-churches, selling the most books, having the biggest crowds and the largest social media following. This is how we judge our success—being at the mountaintop, looking over and at everyone else. But we must remember Jesus never stays on the mountain for long. When he finishes his teaching, he comes down the mountain and heals a leper (at the beginning of chapter 8). Jesus gets his hands dirty and engages humanity and even risks his life. He always comes down from the mountain to the crowds. Nothing flashy or sparkly with lights and fireworks. Not a 21<sup>st</sup> century form of Constantinian Christianity endorsed by the nation. But something rather simple. A simple savior whose simple task is to “fish for people.” Jesus always prioritized people, which is why he comes down from the mountain.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight. (“Simple Gifts”)

To come down in the valley 'tis the gift. Not to go up the mountain. Love did not remain high above the earth, but love came down to earth in Jesus Christ when God became human through his flesh. Jesus helps us make a turn to the human. He doesn’t stay on mountaintops.

His rhetorical emphasis on who is “blessed” should draw our attention away from the mountaintops of life and perhaps toward life’s valleys because those he names are not necessarily the qualities that people desire. Those he names will not get you promoted to move up. They are not the popular in society but maybe more like the peculiar. The poor in spirit. Those who mourn. The meek. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The merciful. The pure in heart. The peacemakers. Those who are persecuted. These are the “blessed” of God and the inheritors of the kingdom. The humble. The underdogs. The underside. Many believed that the kingdom of God would have been ushered in by a great war and force of arms but Jesus reveals the humble and simple nature of the kingdom and that it is for those who have utter dependence on God and can’t offer anything to God—those “like empty pitchers [at] a full fountain, with no merits of [their] own”(James Weldon Johnson).

But this emphasis should be no surprise based on Jesus’ own humble beginnings and his interesting genealogy, including misfits and outcasts. Jesus was not an elite. His litany of “blessed,” the beatitudes, should bother us, because if we are here, most likely we are of the elite in comparison. We’ve been to the mountaintop but the question is whether we ever come down from the top. We may be so mesmerized by the mountain and think that’s where God is, that we forget those in the lonesome valley. We may only want mountaintop experiences in the Christian life where that is the goal and once we reach the top, the state of nirvana, high above the clouds, seemingly closer to heaven, away from it all, we think all is well

because the peak is our preference. Yet, we must recognize that the masses of people in the world are not at the peak, the top, nor does Jesus call us away from people.

The heavenly discourse of Jesus brings us closer to the earth not farther away from it. On earth as it is in heaven. Jesus doesn't take us up the mountain to just be there with him, to sit at his feet, and bask in his presence as we create a new church plant on the peak singing "climb every mountain" to ourselves. He may take us up the mountain to get a different perspective on the world, on life, to get a view from the top, knowing full well that his call is to lift up those at the bottom, those who are struggling in this life, those who have hit hard times. I know this because Jesus always comes down the mountain to heal, to cleanse, to stop storms. Even when he is high and lifted up on the hill of mount Calvary, he comes down into a cold grave to save.

Our passage may present the ancient mountainous environment that is equated with God's presence but Jesus' sermon reveals that it is the lowly, the meek, the weak, the ones who may not be able to ascend the mountain that express the kingdom most fully on the earth. Ironically, through these we experience heaven on earth. His teaching on the mountain actually blesses the earth and calls us to be in touch with the poor in spirit. Those who mourn. The meek. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The merciful. The pure in heart. The peacemakers. Those who are persecuted. In other words, those "who [may] stand with their backs against the wall"(Howard Thurman) many times.

If you're back is against the wall, you're in good company. But if we are putting others up against a wall, we are actually pitting ourselves against Jesus and might not be the Christians we think we are. We might be what George Whitfield and John Wesley called an "almost Christian." Wesley says, "The Church is full of almost Christians who have not gone all the way with Christ." All the way down the mountain where you will actually encounter God and find Jesus in the trenches of trouble. For in Matthew, Jesus also says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'(Matt 25). As Frederick Buechner writes, "They're not what you'd call a high-class crowd—peasants and fisherfolk for the most part, on the shabby side, not all that bright." But they are the ones to whom the kingdom belongs. It might be as James Forbes has said after all, that "Nobody is going to get into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor."

So come down the mountain to go "all the way with Christ" and exorcize your mountaintop mentality and get into the mess of ministry on earth. Go all the way with Christ and get into the mess of moral Mondays and moral Tuesdays and moral Wednesdays and moral Thursdays and moral Fridays and moral Saturdays and moral Sundays because every day is a moral day. Go all the way with Christ and get into the mess and participate in a prayer vigil for young and old lives cut short by gun violence with the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham. Go all the way with Christ and get into the mess and join a circle of support to help former prisoners reenter society and reclaim their humanity through the Interfaith Hospitality Network. Go all the way with Christ and get into the mess and volunteer to serve meals to the homeless at Urban Ministries. Go all the way with Christ and get into the mess and help our public education system right here in North Carolina do better for our children and teachers. Go all the way with Christ and get into the mess and find out what you can do to help end poverty in Durham and surrounding areas. Go all the way with Christ and get into the mess of ministry on earth because it is there that you will discover your blessing.

You might have been to the mountaintop but you can't stay there. Why would you? Because Jesus always comes down the mountain and I'm gonna join him and come down my mountain right now.