

## “A MAN OF AUTHORITY”

March 6, 2005

Fourth Sunday in Lent (One Great Hour of Sharing)

Scripture Readings: Psalm 23; Matthew 5:21-22a, 27-28, 33-34, 38-39, and 7:28-29

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My father taught at a college which offered something called “The Artists Series,” bringing to a small town in East Tennessee some of the finest classical instrumentalists and singers of the 1930s and ‘40s—and even beyond, though I personally am most familiar with those two decades. Our whole family attended every concert; and I, being the youngest, went mostly because I was made to go. But there was one Tuesday night in early February of my eleventh year I was compelled, against my wishes as I recall, to hear a young tenor from Sweden, and that evening turned out to be one of the highlights of my life. Since then I have tried to purchase every recording Jussi Bjoerling made. For a few years the records were 78s, which some of you will remember; then I collected LPs; and now I have on compact disks most of what he recorded. He may have been the greatest tenor ever, or he may not. To me he was. And even though he died 45 years ago, because of his recordings, to me he still is. I am well aware that many of you probably could not care any less about this; but if you should care, and if you would like to get a sense of the beauty and clarity and range and power of his voice, I can let you listen to his performances on CDs. I tell you this to make a point: modern technology allows us to hear or even see things that were recorded years ago. We cannot do that, however, for events or performances that took place before the inventions of Thomas Edison.

We who gather in worship today have no photographs or recordings or DVDs of Jesus; we don’t even possess anything he wrote. In the case of Jesus, we are entirely dependent on witnesses, and in most cases on the gospel writers who themselves had to rely on recollections of others. So, if we want to get to know this man who lived so long ago, it takes work and imagination to listen to the witnesses and determine what they were really trying to tell us. Indeed, it takes a lifetime of listening because we somehow never completely get hold of who he was and what he was about, so we have to listen to the witnesses again and again.

Many theologians and scholars of the nineteenth century attempted, without much success, to produce biographies of Jesus; and in 1906 Albert Schweitzer published *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, a study of these attempts. He concluded that each biographer revealed more about himself than he did about Jesus. The twentieth century saw other efforts to discover Jesus the man, the Jesus Seminar being the most recent example. I have no interest in belittling any effort to discover the historical Jesus or in attempting a search of my own. But on this communion Sunday, when in a sense we gather in the upper room with Jesus and the twelve disciples, it may be to point out a couple of things we find in the so-called Sermon on the Mount.

You have read or heard this “sermon”—or at least parts of it—many times; some of you may

have read all of it at one sitting. As you probably know, it is likely that the sermon in its entirety was not a sermon at all, at least not in the way we use that word. It covers many more topics than the three points to which my seminary professors insisted preachers should limit themselves. Besides, the sermon requires only about fifteen minutes to deliver, when we all know that any sermon worthy of the name should last a minimum of twenty minutes—and the great Jonathan Edwards often held forth for two hours or more. So the number of topics touched on and the brevity with which some of them are presented suggest that this is a collection of scattered and disparate sayings that the gospel writer has compiled to put at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. And this morning I want to focus on just two parts of the sermon.

First, our scripture reading included four paragraphs that begin with something like “You have heard it said, . . . but I say to you . . .”. It is not my intention this morning to look closely at any one of these paragraphs, though each of the four could be used as a basis for a separate sermon, and there could be an interesting series based on the four paragraphs. I am most interested, however, in the formula itself and in its implications for our understanding of Jesus. To many who revered the Torah and the writings of prophets he must have seemed presumptuous. He quoted from ancient scriptures and then dared to give his own interpretation of the sacred writings, adding new dimensions to their meaning. To those who based their belief system on past interpretations of the Torah, he surely came across as a young upstart.

We can understand how the religious leaders of early Judaism considered these statements to be blasphemous. On the other hand, it seems to me that Jesus was simply willing to offer his own understanding, based in part on what he had learned of Hebraic and Jewish wisdom and also in part on his own experience and thinking. He was not rejecting the wisdom of former times, but he was willing to be seen as the author of his own ideas and willing to accept responsibility for them. Whenever he was asked about some aspect of the law or the prophetic writings, he did not cite one or another of the “authorities” of Judaism; he stood on his own authority. He might have said, as did one of his later followers, “Here I stand!” And I am sure that Jesus' willingness to stand on his own made a great impression on those early witnesses. That is the first point.

The second point has to do with the content of the sermon, and I just want to take a quick look at the Beatitudes with which the sermon begins. We are so familiar with these words that we may not think about how powerfully they contradicted the prevailing attitudes and assumptions of first-century Judaism. “Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are the meek; blessed are you when you are reviled and persecuted.” And aren't those words as startling today as the day they were uttered? They contradict widespread attitudes within twenty-first century Christendom as surely as they did for those who first heard them two thousand years ago. “Blessed are those who are rich in spirit” would fit more comfortably with religious folk today. Our culture generally is more ready to believe that “nice guys finish last” than that the meek and weak will inherit the earth. And all of us feel much more blessed when we are *not* reviled and persecuted than when we are.

These are a few examples of how Jesus turned accepted values upside down, and we can find many others in the gospel accounts. So many of the parables have things backwards. A

Samaritan, a member of a group the Jews regarded as inferior, is the one commended rather than the priest or the religious Levite. The workers who spent only one hour in the fields receive the same pay as those who toiled in the hot sun all day long. The prodigal younger son is honored with a feast the like of which the loyal older son never received.

So both the form and the content of the sermon are revolutionary. And, when Jesus had finished, “the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one with authority, and not as their scribes.” Amen.