

Epiphany 4A: Matthew 5:1-12
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
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If you ask the preacher William Willimon, he'll tell you that the world ended on a Sunday evening back in 1963. For on that night, in Greenville, South Carolina, in defiance of the state's time-honored "blue laws," the Fox Theatre opened...*on Sunday!* Not wanting to miss out on this momentous event, Willimon and six other regular attendees of the Youth Fellowship at Buncombe Street United Methodist Church made a pact. They'd all enter the front door of the church, be seen, then quietly slip out the back door and meet up with John Wayne at the Fox. That evening signified for Willimon a watershed in the history of the church. For, on that night, Greenville—one of the last pockets of resistance to secularization in the Western world—had surrendered, capitulated. On that Sunday in 1963, the Fox Theatre had gone head-to-head with the church over who would provide the worldview for the young. And the Fox Theatre had won. From that point on, churches in Greenville were on notice—they could no longer expect to be supported and propped up by the larger culture. There would be no more free passes, no more free rides.

Willimon's parents, like many parents in the early 60s, had never worried about whether he would grow up Christian. The church was the only show in town. On Sundays, the whole town effectively closed down. You could not even buy a gallon of gas. There'd be a traffic jam at a quarter to 10 on Sunday as everybody in town went to their respective churches. When parents brought their children to church and then Sunday school, they were, in their mind, affirming everything that was good, wholesome, reasonable, and American. And it was taken for granted that church, home, school and state worked together to instill and reinforce "Christian values." The sense was that people grew up Christian simply by being lucky enough to be born in places like Greenville, SC or Macon, GA or Tyler, TX.

Now, it may not have been in 1963 precisely, as Willimon remembers, but sometime between 1960 and 1980, that world—the world where the church was the only game in town and could expect support from the larger society—that ended. Now, no American Christian today believes that one becomes Christian simply by breathing the air and drinking the water of American life.

This is a big change. It used to be the case that not being Christian in America was a problem. "It's tough to be a Jew in Greenville," the rabbi would say. "We are forever telling our children, 'That's fine for everyone else, but it's not fine for you. You are special. You are different. You are a Jew. You have a different story. A different set of values.'"

Now, Christian clergy like myself regularly hear young parents say the same thing to their children: "That's fine for everyone else, but it's not fine for you. You are special. You are different. You are a Christian. You have a different story. A different set of values."

And it's not simply that the larger society no longer affirms the principles of Christ's teachings—that's obviously true—or that Christianity is no longer respected—also true—but it's

become difficult just to keep Sunday mornings free for worship, with all the competition families have from soccer games, swim meets, weekend trips, and college sports games.

Now, I'm not telling you anything you don't know. Many of you I've heard lamenting and decrying how things "aren't the way they used to be." Many of you grew up in a world not too unlike the world Willimon grew up in, I suspect. And you've witnessed in your life events not unlike the one Willimon recalls, events that marked the end of the world you grew up in.

And the fact is, things *have* changed, a lot. In the last forty years there's been a seismic shift in people's view of the church. And that makes a big difference in how we go about the business of being church. We now have to be more conscientious, more intentional, more deliberate in how we live as Christian, and bring up Christians in our homes. Tertullian was right when he wrote in the 2nd century: "Christians are made, not born." What we knew theologically, we now know experientially: Christians are not *born* in places like Greenville or anywhere else. Christians are intentionally *made* by committed, faithful Christians who understand their responsibility and the joy of passing on the faith to others, to the next generation.

Now, if we had had more churches, more families, who understood this charge thirty, forty years ago, we may not be in the situation we are in today—I'm referring to the general "graying of the church," the aging of church membership. But now, because we can no longer depend on the support of the culture and the state, we are rediscovering what it's like to be the minority, the outsider, the underdog. This is not, however, a wholly bad thing. For, while the Church has lost its authority, its influence, its command over the hearts and minds of people in the West, that loss has pushed us to remember who we are, what our mission is.

We are today in a situation not unlike what the people of God were in in today's lesson from Deuteronomy. Here Moses and the Israelites were—They've meandered their way from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised land—took them forty years—and they are standing on the edge of the Jordan about to enter the Land of Milk and Honey, to claim the promise God made to them. But before they cross over, Moses stands up and puts a challenge before them: "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you. But if your heart turns away, and you are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess."

The passage presents God's people with a blunt choice: follow God or chase after idols. No half-hearting it. But what's more significant is the fact that the passage was, we think, written many years, centuries after Moses gave the Israelites that choice, far from the Promised Land. Its original audience knew for themselves the consequences of unfaithfulness. Between the Exodus and Exile, their ancestors had forgotten God's ways and been conquered and led away to Babylon in chains. Their descendants were now remembering how their forebears, initially so confidently in their loyalty, had, little by little, over the course of several hundred years, gotten "more sensible" about this matter. They said to each other, "The Lord, to be sure, is our God, but who is to say there is not something true and valuable in the gods of our neighbors, in Baal and

Asherah and Mammon? And if there is, surely we should give them their due honor. Surely, in religious matters it is wiser to be inclusive than exclusive.” Sound familiar? The point is, their tolerance and broadmindedness, really their anxiety and insecurities, their need to be respected by the people around them, that all got the better of them, and they gave in. Their descendants, looking back at the folly of their ancestors, recalled the challenge put to them by Moses: “Therefore, choose life, that you and your offspring may live.” They understood the choice wasn’t just put to their ancestors; they faced the same choice in their own day.

It’s a choice Christians today have to make, too—to give in to what everyone else is doing, to capitulate, to accommodate to the philosophical presumptions and ethical norms of the surrounding society, in an effort to be “relevant.” Or else to commit ourselves to not only knowing God and walking in his ways, but to passing those ways on to others. This second option is definitely harder, and choosing it almost guarantees that we’ll be subject to taunts and name-calling and sneers. But the first option, giving in, while it can often be easier in the moment, ultimately leads to *ir*relevance and then extinction.

Years ago, when I was in seminary, I came across a quote that has stuck with me. It’s from a scholar named Aaron Milavec. He said: “Any community that cannot artfully and effectively pass on its cherished way of life as a program for divine wisdom and graced existence cannot long endure. Any way of life that cannot be clearly specified, exhibited, and differentiated from the alternative modes operative within the surrounding culture is doomed to growing insignificance and gradual assimilation.” In other words, if an organization like a church doesn’t offer some alternative to the surrounding culture, then people have no reason to commit themselves. They can just as easily sleep in and spend Sunday morning reading the paper at Starbucks. But if we can demonstrate—not just tell, but show—a different way to live, a way characterized by divine wisdom and graced existence, then others will take notice and perhaps want to know more about what we are up to here.

The thing is, we don’t have to reinvent ourselves in order to do this. Just being Christian, listening to God and holding fast to his promises, *that* is enough to distinguish us from others. I mean, just take our Gospel lesson this morning—the Beatitudes. These Beatitudes, these blessings, present an incredible picture of what it looks like in the Kingdom of Heaven. In the Kingdom, Jesus says, the poor become royalty, the miserable are comforted, victims get restitution, and the humble are guaranteed a claim on the earth’s goodness. It’s an astonishing picture, so counter to the way things usually work... where it’s the wealthy, the high achiever, the famous, the well-placed who win in life. But Jesus is here presenting a different vision, a new perspective, a broader horizon of imagination, one which gives us new possibilities for the world and our living in it.

Living according to this picture, living into these promises presented in the Beatitudes, that’s the kind of thing Milavec means by “a program of divine wisdom and graced existence.” It’s something the world doesn’t know anything about. And it’s something we have within us, we’ve been given this different way to live, we’ve received the promises. It remains to us to pass these promises to our sons and daughters, to our grandchildren and nieces and nephews, to our neighbors and the children in our church.

Many Christians at the age many of you are at think that, because they are retired from work, their job as Christians is done too. Their kids, if they have any, are out of the house, and they may or may not have held to the faith. But they figure they've done their bit. But that is amazingly shortsighted, a waste. You see, by this age, you've seen and done a lot as Christians, you've gone to church, heard plenty of sermons, you know what it is to wrestle with God or with doubts, maybe you've walked apart from a time, doing things on your own, you've made mistakes—in your marriages, with your kids, with money, with God—and you've learned from those mistakes. You're not a perfect Christian, but, because of the fact that you are not, you *are* in a perfect position to help others on their walk with Christ, to help them to benefit from your wisdom, the hard-earned wisdom you've gained.

You see, it's not just about us, about those in the pews today, but those who come after us. The question is, Will the church be there for them? I ask myself, When I am old and no longer able to preach, will there be a faithful congregation in which I can worship? Will my grandchildren have a faithful church in which to grow up? Will God's ways be passed on to succeeding generations or will it die with us? These are important questions, critical ones. It's not, as it is so often put, Will our children have faith?, but more fundamentally, *Will our faith have children?*

As we gather this morning to give thanks to God for the past year, and seek to discern God's call on us in this next year, I charge you all to consider, in addition to the priorities identified in the Annual Report, how might you personally and as a Church more deliberately and more fully pass on God's promises to the next generation, not just to our own members but to others as well. What would this church look like if we fully embraced that calling? How might we go about doing it? Whose lives might we change?