

Christianity 101: The Sermon on the Mount
(Part III of a sermon series exploring foundational Christian beliefs)
Matthew 5:1-16

Palisades Community Church
February 9, 2014

I find it comfortably coincidental that the “Sermon on the Mount” is the topic of this pulpit, in the midst of a sermon series on beliefs foundational to Christianity, on a Sunday devoted to the legacy of scouting in this community and the world.

This is an intersection of ideals that ought not to be ignored when a congregation that prizes community engagement is graced with the presence of that community’s young people. I hope to demonstrate the inherent connection between the teachings of Jesus from a hillside, on the one hand, and on the other, the code of conduct for kids who deliver Christmas cheer to the needy.

The father of Robert S. S. Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts, was a minister and Oxford professor who died when his son was three years old. Raised in a Christian home by a resourceful mother of strong faith, Robert matured to become a hero of the British military, a skilled naturalist, and an accomplished leader of young people. No doubt, Robert was familiar with the “Sermon on the Mount” and the standard it set for Jesus’ would-be friends: kindness, charity, conviction—values for life reflected in the Boy Scout Oath: *“On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God...and to help other people at all times.”* No doubt Robert Baden-Powell considered Jesus a friend.

For her part, Juliette Gordon Low of Savannah, GA, was personally encouraged by Baden-Powell to form the Girl Scouts of the USA. Perhaps because Juliette was herself hearing-impaired, the Girl Scouts from the beginning welcomed those with

disabilities into their ranks. No doubt, Juliette was familiar with the “Sermon on the Mount”— and the standard it set for Jesus’ would-be friends. Just listen to a few statements attributed to her:

“Right is right, even if no one else does it”

“Be a giver, not a taker”

“Nothing can dim the light which shines from within”

Kindness, charity, conviction--values for life reflected in the Girl Scout Promise: *“On my honor, I will try to serve God...to help other people at all times.”* No doubt Juliette Gordon Low considered Jesus a friend.

If the “Sermon on the Mount” is so foundational to a Christian congregation, and arguably so friendly to two of the most popular and effective youth organizations in modern times, then what should we remember about it?

First, that the Gospel in which it appears is attributed by name to the disciple Matthew, but it was prepared by an unknown Christian teacher in the last third of the first century, long after the deaths of Jesus and Matthew. That editor used as one of his sources a collection of Jesus’ sayings that the apostle Matthew is believed to have handed down. So the “Sermon on the Mount” is not word for word a speech once given by Jesus on a hillside in Galilee. It is a reconstruction of various materials, some gathered from the historical Jesus, some from Matthew himself, some from the early Church.

Second, we should remember that the sermon on the hillside is the first of five sermons by Jesus, called “discourses”, that appear in the Gospel of Matthew. Each of these discourses accomplishes a particular purpose, yet each is an essential part in the completeness of the story that unfolds in the Gospel. But the Sermon on the Mount is the

longest by far, taking up Chapters 5 through 7, leaving little doubt about Jesus' expectations of anyone who would be his friend.

On one occasion in the pulpit, I turned to the final page of my prepared manuscript, ready to bring that sermon to impressive conclusion, only to find that I had mistakenly left the final page on my desk. The challenging breadth of the Sermon on the Mount leaves little doubt that Jesus had carried all his pages to the hillside.

The page read earlier has come to be known as "the Beattitudes", or the "Blesseds", or in the original Greek, "those that are happy". The Beattitudes are Jesus' answer to the Ten Commandments of the Hebrew Scriptures, with which he was well acquainted. But the Ten Commandments were ancient laws. Jesus taught that attitudes are more basic to human behavior than laws. What is in your mind and heart supersedes what you are subjected to by law.

Think Nelson Mandela. Jesus turns everything upside down!

"Blessed (happy) are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven...Blessed (happy) are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

Think of the homeless children sleeping in cold cars. Jesus turns everything upside down!

"Blessed (happy) are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."

Think of the families fleeing their bombarded towns in Syria. Jesus turns everything upside down!

Laws are human attempts by some to regulate the behavior of others through fear of penalty. Attitudes determine behavior, no matter what the laws are. As opposed to

laws, attitudes are timeless. Jesus' teaching is for the purpose of changing the world by changing attitudes, and that teaching is based upon his understanding of the forgiving and loving character of God. Jesus would have his would-be friends change the world—turn it upside down—by changing the course of human actions and interactions.

A few days ago I received a letter from a man with whom I shared ministry in Illinois, a letter in which he wrote about what his little grandson Joshua said one night before going to sleep. *"I'm going to try to be better"*, Joshua said. *"Better for what, Joshua?"* *"Everything,"* Joshua answered. *"You only get to live today once and then its tomorrow and you only get to live that once. I want to make each day the best day that I can because we never get to do it again."*

With that attitude, what kind of world is waiting for Joshua?

(Read from front page article, Washington Post 2/8/14)

Bangul, Central African Republic—*Tens of thousands of Muslims are fleeing to neighboring countries by plane and truck as Christian militias stage brutal attacks, shattering the social fabric of this war-ravaged nation. In towns and villages, as well as here in the capital, Christian vigilantes wielding machetes have killed scores of Muslims, who are a minority here, and burned and looted their houses and mosques...according to witnesses, aid agencies, and peacekeepers."*

That reads to me of Christians who are unfamiliar with the Sermon on the Mount.

I have come across another letter, this from one Robert Baden-Powell, written as a farewell message to Scouts, published after his death at age 83 in 1941. It reads in part:

*"I believe that God put us in this jolly world to be happy (**blessed**) and enjoy life. Happiness (**blessedness**) does not come from being rich, nor merely being successful in*

*your career, nor by self-indulgence. The real way to get happiness **(to be blessed)** is by giving out happiness to other people **(by blessing other people)**. Try and leave this world a little better than you found it, and when your turn comes to die, you can die happy **(blessed)** in feeling that at nay rate you have not wasted your time but have done your best...”*

That reads to me of one who was familiar with the “Sermon on the Mount”.

That reads to me of one who considered Jesus a friend.

“You only get to live today once and then its tomorrow and you only get to live that once. I want to make each day the best day that I can because we never get to do it again.”