When I was a senior in college, I had pretty much finished the requirements for my major. And I knew I wanted to change my focus to philosophy in graduate school – (which turned out to be my area of concentration within 19th Century Studies). … By then, I had taken many of the upper level philosophy courses but had missed the freshman-level Intro to Philosophy. My Professor, Dr. Brown, suggested I register for Intro. I would already know the material, he said, but it would be worth it to watch the people in the class – how they respond and process the information – how they change through the semester as they are stretched in new directions. Seeing him teach the class would help me know what to do later, when I would do it on my own. So that’s what I did – in my final semester of college, I took Intro to Philosophy. I watched a classroom of students – most of them less than a year out of high school – have their first experience pondering ethical systems, deductive logic, idealism, epistemology (which is the philosophy of knowledge), aesthetics, and the nature of existence.

+++ As an example, let’s think about some of the questions they grappled with when we studied aesthetics: What IS “art?”… Does anything painted on a canvas qualify as “art?”… Or, does it have to convey a message – articulate something that goes beyond simple words? Maybe art expresses an emotion – if so, when I look at the artwork and I do feel emotion, is it my emotion I’m feeling – or maybe it’s the artist’s emotion being shared with me – or perhaps some combination of the two? Does that mean the viewer has to get involved for it to be art? If that’s the case, then the same painting might sometimes be art and sometimes not be, depending on whether it’s being looked at – or who is looking at it! … … Here’s an example: When someone places everyday items in a museum and calls it art: a chewed piece of gum, painting might sometimes be art and sometimes not be, depending on whether it’s being looked at – or who is looking at it!

+++ Imagine a world class museum looking at a chewed up piece of gum, using your valuable time to ponder whether or not it’s “art.”

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And, if that is why the artist did it, then maybe it does become art… However, if they had just randomly put the gum there, maybe even as a prank, then it wouldn’t be art! The problem is, you have no way of knowing what their intention was… The gum is just… there – left to speak for itself – and you have to decide what it’s all about. +++ ++++ And that was just the week they covered aesthetics. +++ Before my very eyes, I saw students open up to the notion that their minds are capable of depths they had never dreamed of before. They realized the ambiguity that sometimes the goal isn’t to have all the answers – just to ask better and better questions… +++ And, Dr. Brown encouraged me to think about how, when it became my turn one day, how I might lead future students to that kind of growth, myself. +++

I think that’s a lot like what happened that day on the side of a mountain, when a massive crowd gathered to hear Jesus’ first major sermon, like a classroom full of freshmen gathering to hear Dr. Brown stretch their horizons with Philosophy. Multitudes of people were already following Jesus because the countryside was abuzz about how he was doing something new. In the verses just before today’s reading, we learn that Jesus was traveling all over “Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and her cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.”

You’ve got to understand – this is not at all what they were used to from their religious leaders, dominated by the Pharisees. Instead of compassion and justice, their needs were consistently neglected. The focus was on enforcing rules – rules about the Sabbath, about cleanliness and purity, rules about their private behavior and family life. Rules and judgement. +++ If there’s one overarching message they got from their religious leaders it was this: “You aren’t good enough for God. You aren’t worthy.” +++ When Jesus appears on the scene, his message is as foreign to these multitudes of poor, oppressed, disregarded people as the mind-blowing philosophy lesson about the Cartesian Delimma is to a classroom full of freshmen. And like those freshmen, they are beginning to realize there are depths of truth that had been hidden from them until now. +++ Jesus turns their world upside down. Forget the prevailing might-makes-right mentality – Jesus insists the last shall be first. In the kingdom of God, the hungry are served first, the oppressed are given justice, the outcast is given shelter. +++ Jesus proclaims that their Creator God loves them, forgives them and redeems them – their God, who never defaults on a covenant – their God, who brought them out of slavery in Egypt – their God, whom the Psalmist praises, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!” +++ ??!! “You’re not good enough for God??!” +++ On the contrary, Jesus assures them: the Lord actually favors people like you: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”
Jesus Christ turns the Law of Moses on its head. He offers a new kind of law – a new kind of covenant. Standing here on the side of a mountain as Moses had so many centuries before, Jesus also speaks the authoritative Word of God. But this time, it’s not a list of “Thou Shalls and Shall Nots.” No – this time Christ invites us to bring our real selves to him – our full selves – broken,… afraid,… damaged,… in grief,… persecuted…. … sinful. +++ “I didn’t come here so I can serve you when you are strong, confident, and happy,” Jesus is telling us, “I am here so that when you need me – when you are weak, timid, or dejected – I will be here for you.” +++ Christ’s message is so reassuring, so comforting, so definitive, that you might expect the crowd to just go home afterwards – satisfied to learn we are all good enough just the way we are because we are blessed by God. Maybe complacency would set in. But after a lifetime of Roman tyranny and strict religious dogmatism, with no one to turn to for comfort, or a blessing – when someone boldly stands up for people like you, speaking out against oppression – condemning a system that gives wealth and power to a few on the backs of everyone else – and when you suddenly find out that God cares about you so deeply, it makes you hungry for more. It energizes you and makes you want to do something. That’s why the crowds following Jesus everywhere he goes keep growing – they can’t get enough of him – they want to hear more – they want to be near Jesus.

OK, we’ve talked about how the great multitude of people responded to the blessings of Christ. But there’s another, smaller group that were there that day that we should consider: the disciples. It’s also their first-time seeing Jesus give a major sermon – and he is teaching his new friends what discipleship is all about. +++ This week, as I thought about this scene on the side of a mountain, the disciples are the ones I kept coming back to – and they are the ones who brought back my semester of Intro to Philosophy with Dr. Brown. Now, the disciples – the ones who’ve been called to “Fish for People” with Jesus, are the ones learning how to do what Jesus does, … by watching him. They are the ones who will one day do this by themselves. +++ And, before their very eyes that day, the disciples saw thrones of people open up to the notion that their God has blessed them despite their despair, in ways they had never dreamed of before. +++ What do the disciples learn? For that matter, what do we learn – and as those who would be disciples ourselves – what do we learn from this morning’s encounter with our savory? +++ We learn where to start: with blessings. Blessings – not judgement… not a lesson on correct theology… not a requirement to “accept Jesus as a personal savior.” … We start with blessings. +++ Before we do anything as disciples – we know that we are already blessed – it’s part of our identity – it’s what we are – … blessed. We are in God’s favor – the recipients of Christ’s tender mercy. +++ Whatever else we do… whatever else we learn… wherever else we are called to serve – we do so with the strength of God’s blessing. +++

And because we are so deeply and freely blessed – with no strings attached – we are free to bless others the same way. +++ When we share the Good News of Christ, we must start with blessings, too. – The Gospel – the promise of salvation – it is not transactional: – “if you do this, or that, then you will find favor in Christ” – like some kind of contract or quid pro quo. NO! – We share the Good News by example – by treating others as Christ treats us. We learn that from Micah this morning – when God’s People have forgotten who they are and want to find their way back. The prophet asks on behalf of Israel, “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” … And the answer? … None of that. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly.” … And the answer? … None of that. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” ++++++ It’s not a transaction – as his blessed disciples, we are called to be a blessing to everyone we meet, always… to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly. To proclaim the lavish grace of Jesus Christ.

The real lesson for us, as disciples of Jesus, is to see how his words that afternoon on the side of a mountain, how those words are in lockstep with his actions. Before and after he declares that the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek and hungry, the merciful and oppressed,… before and after he declares that they are blessed, … Jesus ministers to the poor in spirit, comforts those who mourn, feeds the hungry, inspires the meek, feeds the hungry, and he demands justice for the oppressed. Christ calls us to follow him close into others’ suffering, to share their weaknesses, ease their burdens, and fight for their freedom. That goes hand-in-hand with proclaiming their blessedness – we can’t truly do one without the other.

+++ The Good News is Christ gives us a shining example of what discipleship is all about – he leaves footprints for us to follow that never fade. +++ You are blessed – know it…. feel it…. believe it. … You are blessed. You always have been. Accept it – thank God for it – then go back out into the world and join Christ as he continues to turn the world upside down – uplifting the weak – and challenging the strong. BE the blessings declared by Christ on that mountainside long ago.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen