

**The Inaugural Address**  
**Matthew 5:1-16**  
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It was almost two weeks ago when our new Governor did that thing that Governor's and Presidents...and even some mayors do in the moments after they have been sworn into office. Governor Pritzker delivered his inaugural address. His theme was "Possibility and Promise." He opened with a reference to the famous sermon of Unitarian pastor Robert Collyer on the Sunday following the Great Chicago Fire almost 150 years ago. He compared the state of Illinois' current mess to the calamity of that great conflagration. He then lifted up those who are being healers of the breach and Illinois' historic leaps forward in response to challenges. His central theme of the rest of the speech was that the acts of government in his words "really do affect the the richness and joy of our lives" and outlined how he thought we could do that again.

In his speech, the Governor followed the unofficial outline of every inaugural speech that kicks off a new administration:

1. Tell it like it is
2. Cast a vision for the future
3. Connect the audience to the vision

The most famous inaugural of all time was probably that of John F. Kennedy...in part because it was the first one with full television coverage...but also because it did all of those things so well... We remember the third part...connect the audience to the vision... "Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: Ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man."

But it didn't start with that....

"The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God."

And with those words President Kennedy told it like it was....then he moved on to cast a vision for the world and then finished with implementation and buying in.

Our Gospel text today is also an inaugural address...According to Matthew, though Jesus had been proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom and healing people for some time...this is his first major public statement...it is in many ways the inaugural address of the new administration...the newly born...and not yet mature....kingdom...commonwealth of God... And what principles and promises do we find in Jesus' inaugural address?...

How things are...

It's in those first blessings...What an odd way to start...blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the meek...blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... What so blessed about being any of those things...It's no picnic being poor, or poor in spirit if that means something more internal and private than economic poverty...Surely there is nothing about mourning that should make us happy....Being meek is certainly not a virtue in our society...after all the squeaky wheel gets the grease...God helps those who help themselves, right? And then those who are starving for righteousness...that must mean those who have none...what's so blessed about the unrighteous?

First, it's important to remember that our modern understanding of some words has changed over time...

Blessed for one...the literal translation of the Greek word could perhaps most correctly be translated in this context as "capable of joy"...

And scholars have suggested that we miss some Greek metaphors in these earlier passages. The poor in spirit are those who know they are in need of something other than their own strength and spirit in order to thrive...The meek are those who are powerless, but nevertheless trust in God—it's a word used elsewhere to describe both Moses and Jesus—hardly wallflowers...but meek in their dependence on God...Those who mourn and those who hunger for righteousness also seem to be those who have had to confront their powerlessness over death and the desire to do good.

So these opening lines seem to be suggesting that the blessed are those who know their own need....spiritual, physical, emotional, eternal...

We are capable of joy if we realize that the reality is that on our own, we cannot fully live the lives we are meant to live...

That's how it is...or at least how Jesus declares it to be.

If you are like me that's a great insight, but it also seems just a bit cruel...blessed are those who mourn? Capable of joy are those who mourn? I don't get it...

But David Lose, a pastor and writer at Luther Seminaries working preacher site gives us some perspective...He remembers...

"When I was in graduate school, one of my teachers, Dr. Cleophus LaRue, would regularly address me as "Dr. Lose." Eventually it made me uncomfortable enough that I said to him, "But Dr. LaRue, I haven't earned my doctorate yet. I don't think you should call me that." "Dr. Lose," he patiently responded, "in the African-American church we are not content to call you what you are, but instead call you what we believe you will be!"<sup>1</sup>. Jesus calls us blessed, I think for the same reason...because in acknowledging our need we take the first step on the road to joy...it's a statement of Christ's belief that this is how we really are...or at least will be."

What do inauguration speeches do next? They cast a vision of the future... and so does Jesus...

Blessed are the merciful...Blessed are the pure in heart...

Blessed are the peacemakers...Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...

In these four phrases, Jesus announces his hopes for his ministry... he outlines 4 categories of ethical and loving behavior that he hopes will define his commonwealth...a vision for the practice of faith...faith in God, or even in humankind...those who forgive...those whose motives are pure...those who seek after true peace...and those who suffer because they take a stand for the gospel of Jesus Christ...

Jesus knows the cost of faithfulness...Even at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus has his eyes on Jerusalem and the cross that waits three years hence...He knows that he will not be the only one to suffer and make sacrifices for the sake of the gospel...that the gospel challenges those in power and puts earthly power and influence at risk.

It is costly to forgive—to set aside one's grudges and one's right to seek revenge and punishment of those who have wronged us...It is costly to sacrifice what is best for ME for what is best for US...it is costly hard work to move toward peace and away from violence and war...and it is truly costly to take a stand for the gospel that is unpopular or challenges the status quo...

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=1542>

But all who undertake these costly paths of discipleship are promised the same thing, by this same dependable God...the capacity for Joy...You are capable of joy when you do these things, Jesus says...and God's further promise... they will receive mercy, they will see God, they will be called children of God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

There is no promise of earthly reward...or protection from harm...but there is great internal reward...to be forgiven as we forgive...to encounter God in the midst of the world we seek to serve...to be numbered with the saints and find ourselves in the family of God....and to know the promise of the great commonwealth to come...surely in all these promises there is room for joy.

So we can see in these opening phrases of Jesus' inaugural address both the way things are in Christ's eyes and the new priorities of his new holy administration in the Kingdom of Heaven. But you know there is something unique here...other than the Godly character of this new administration....

In most inaugural addresses as we know them...the priorities are for those in power....to tell the legislature what they need to be doing in the coming days...and the promises are for those who are governed....that they might know their needs are recognized and met....But here in Jesus' inaugural address, we in the church find ourselves in a unique position...for we are recipients of all of the promises...**and** the priorities...

But Jesus is not yet done...and that's when we get to the "making it personal" part of getting us to connect with the promises and vision that have come before...

You are salt of the earth Jesus says...You are the light of the world...

Salt...in Matthew's community had several uses: it could accompany a sacrifice (Lev 2:13); it was a symbol of covenant fidelity and loyalty (Ezra 2:14); eating together was often called 'sharing salt' so it also shows a relationship between people; it was used for seasoning (Job 6:6); purification (2 Kings 2:19-22); and, it was used as a preservative. Most folks today mostly think of salt as seasoning...but our grandmothers would have thought of it more as a preservative. Perhaps the most important aspect of salt is the reality that it is not an element useful to itself. You don't just eat salt. You don't cure salt. You don't preserve salt. It is only valuable in its application to other things. It flavors something else. It is used to cure something else. It preserves something else.

And light...is very much the same...Do you just look at light? Not often...not if you want to keep your vision...just look at the light and you go

blind...BUT...light is what makes it possible for us to see and read and encounter the world and all of its beauty and, sometimes, ugliness. Again, it is valuable because it allows others to see...to learn...to understand...

Jesus knows our need and declares it the first step toward joy....  
Jesus proclaims a vision of ethical and obedient behavior ...mercy...purity of heart... peacemaking...a willingness to confront power where they injure or oppress even if they may respond with persecution...  
and then concludes this inaugural address telling us we are salt and light....

On this Sunday when we look back at the year that has been and look hopefully forward to the year ahead, it's appropriate for us to ask ourselves if our priorities are aligned with Christ's....I'm hopeful that we are truly on that road...imperfectly living into the kingdom inaugurated 2000 years ago on a Galilean hillside.

If we can truly continue to ever more faithfully allow his priorities to be ours....get further on board with Christ's new administration....in the coming commonwealth...we can be...we will be...salt and light...we will serve in ways that help feed the world...literally and spiritually...we will preserve that which is good from our traditions...but not in a way that overpowers the new thing God is doing...

We can be light...helping others see the world and themselves in a new way...a way that makes all of us blessed...capable of joy... That's an administration we can get behind...That's something to be Joyful about...to consider ourselves Blessed to receive....

Thanks be to God.