

So often when we read the gospel,
 we first think about what Jesus *is saying*.
 But today, I want to consider *who's listening*
 to Jesus.

To examine first the people gathered to hear Jesus
 before we look at his words.

At the end of Chapter Four, the gospel writer Matthew
 takes care to record who comes to listen to Jesus:
 those afflicted with various diseases and pains,
 the sick and epileptics and paralytics and demoniacs.
 These are folks whose troubles are evident to everyone around them.
 What's "wrong" with them is clear, on the outside:
 the paralytics can't walk
 and the demoniacs can't always talk
 and the epileptics experience body-wrenching seizures.
 For this crowd that gathers around Jesus,
 everybody *knows* their sickness and troubles.
 Everybody can see that these folks
 need help.

But then there's another crowd listening to Jesus
 as he gives this sermon on a mini mountain.
 This group includes the disciples,
 and everybody else who's gathered.
 For these folks, there's nothing *clearly* wrong with them;
 they have no apparent troubles.
 The disciples look like strapping young fishermen
 and the other people in the crowd—
 throngs who've come from Galilee, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond—
 I imagine they look like "normal people" in their day.

On the outside, there's nothing apparently wrong with them.
 Unlike the leper, they're able to hide their warts.
 Unlike a paralytic, they appear to navigate the world with ease.
 It's not that these people are without troubles.
 It's just that their sicknesses and troubles,
 various diseases and pains,

they are less evident to the eye.
Their brokenness hides.

But Jesus knows it.
Jesus knows troubles just as significant as paralysis and epilepsy
are there.
Because he preaches about it.

Jesus says, I know you do wrong.
I know you get angry with and insult people around you.
Jesus says, “When you are offering your gift at the altar,
if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you...”
that means he knows we do *the wrong thing*
to provoke someone else’s anger.
And Jesus knows we objectify women based purely on their bodies
and turn people into objects for our pleasure,
and therefore undermine the God-given mutuality of marriage and, really,
all relationships.
Jesus knows these folks get divorced, unfairly walk away from their families
or unfairly have their families walk away from them.
Jesus knows that folks in this crowd yell at their kids, cut off their parents,
make promises they can’t keep, use language that demeans,
and trust in powers and institutions that ultimately will fail them.

In this crowd of people with very obvious physical maladies,
Jesus decides to address the spiritual maladies,
the sins that undermine relationships
and cause various pains and sicknesses to both
the victim *and* perpetrator.
In essence, Jesus says,
“You may think I am here to heal the physically ill;
but theirs is the lesser sickness
present here
in this crowd.”

What a sermon to preach!
Anyone who was expecting the words of blessedness from before
to continue

must have surely been disappointed.
 Because rather than preach about the obvious
 —the physical sickness on such unsightly display—
 Jesus goes after those who may look, for all the world,
 to have no real problem.
 But these people are falling apart.
 Christ acknowledges the harsh truths
 that these normal-seeming folks listening to him
 often hide
 because God cares about these ills and troubles too.

Perhaps we are disappointed with this kind of sermon, as well.
 Perhaps we came to church hoping for more beatitudes
 or, as one of my preacher friends put it,
 “a happy-fuzzy-rainbow-hearts-teddy-bear Jesus story
 where Jesus healed a demoniac
 and hugged a baby
 and handed out lollipops
 before he rode away on his tyrannosaurus rex.”¹

But that’s not what we get today.
 Today Jesus confronts us with our harsh truths that we love to hide.
 And while we might want to explain away
 Jesus’ words by researching first-century temple offering practices
 or justifying how marital law is different then and now,
 the secret sins Jesus addressed amongst his crowd
 are still the ones we might find in this room today.

We do wrong by one another.
 We make people angry but curse *them* instead.
 We value specific bodies—beautiful, young, strong, able, white—
 more than others.
 We may not be divorced
 but we break relationships every time we decide to exclude a friend
 because of their politics, or because of their unsavory past,
 or because they’re a widow or widower and everyone else is still a couple.

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We may not all be paralytics,
 but many among us know the paralysis of addiction.
 We may not be possessed by “demons”
 but we are possessed by an unrelenting drive for perfection.
 Which explains why we hide
 all those harsh, imperfect truths
 Jesus knows about us.

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Right before Jesus tells all these harsh truths about our imperfections,
 he talks about perfection.
 Not our perfection,
 but his perfection.
 He says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets;
 I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”
 For us Christians, Jesus is the perfection of the law;
 he did not come to abolish the perfection of God’s law,
 but to fulfill it.

Jesus talks about this perfection—in this sermon and elsewhere.
 And it is Godly perfection.
 And it is a perfection Jesus claims as his own,
 because he knows full well that WE cannot achieve it.
 Jesus fulfills perfection because we cannot on our own.
 God sent to us Jesus, who was and is perfect,
 so *Jesus*—not us!—would perfect God’s perfect law.

So, while Jesus dishes out some harsh truths about our imperfections,
 he also dishes out God’s perfection.
 Christ recognizes our sin,
 and covers it with God’s righteousness.
 Christ knows our badness and our ugliness,
 our warts and our worst,
 and gives us God’s love anyway.

And with God’s love,
 and Christ’s perfection,

the folks listening to that sermon
 are invited to offer up the totality of their lives,
 the good, the bad, and the ugly,
 so that God can bless it and transform it
 into the presence of God's very own self,
 transforming them into a community of God's love,
 into the Kingdom of God.

That crowd who was listening to Jesus preach that day long ago—
 those seemingly “normal” folks whose troubles and imperfections
 were not apparent until Jesus made them clear as day in his sermon—
 remember that they became the very first church members.
 They were the ones who founded what we are doing now.
 Infantile as Paul will accurately call them,
 Christ nonetheless made them into God's servants.
 Christ's perfection made them into God's perfect field for growth,
 God's grand building to shelter others.
 Spiritual children though they might have been
 they were—as we are—the Church.

The hope is that the Church—including our community in this place—
 is still the crowd of people listening to Jesus.
 The hope is that
 in a world obsessed with self-perfection,
 the Church is the places
 where you hear that God fully knows you, imperfections and all,
 and fully loves you.
 . . . That the church is still the place where
 we offer up the totality of our lives,
 sins and sicknesses, obvious and hidden.
 . . . That the church is the place, the people,
 and the Table, where God blesses our offering
 and transforms it into the presence of the living Christ
 and transforms us—the entirety of us—
 into the beloved Kingdom of God.

AMEN.