

SERMON February 5th, 2023

Epiphany 5

Ever since I was a young kid growing up and learning how to play the game of golf, I was enamored by professional golfer, Arnold Palmer. As a kid, and then a teen, and then in my college days, I had the chance to see him with some frequency from behind the gallery ropes. This included the US Open Championship at Merion (Philadelphia) Golf Club in 1971, at White Marsh Valley Country Club in the mid 60s, the PGA championship in Columbus Ohio in 1964, and others. In addition, I watched him from afar on big three golf on TV on weekends when I was just learning the game. This program featured Arnold Palmer, Gary Player, and a very young Jack Nicklaus competing head to head each week at a different golf course.

I remember it like it was yesterday – the hold he had on the galleries who followed him. He always, always, when not preparing for or hitting his shot, as he walked, was looking intently at the people on both sides of the fairway from inside the gallery ropes. But not just looking at the people, I mean staring them in the eye, making eye contact, smiling, almost acknowledging those whose eyes he met and who met him.

You almost felt as if you were the sole recipient of that Arnold Palmer gaze, that smile, that he was doing all of this just for you, almost as if it gave him pleasure to do so. And you almost felt moved to return the nod, as if to say, yeah, you saw me, me, Arnie. You know me, Arnie! It's no wonder they called this phenomenon “Arnie’s Army” because it was a real thing. You just couldn't help but be drawn into his whole persona. Everyone around him was drawn into this thing of his. I often wondered how he did it – how he maintain his concentration and higher level of play, when he was always so busy making eye contact with the crowd while walking to his next shot.

Which finally gets us off the golf course, and onto our gospel today and the last week and for the next several weeks in fact up through and including Transfiguration Sunday. I'm talking about Jesus and Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, of Jesus.

Jesus has just gone up the mountain with his disciples along with the crowds. Now we don't know for sure who was in the crowd that day, but we can imagine it was a combination of the dispossessed, the outsiders of the day, the down and outers, people looking for a message of hope, people looking for relief from their current pain, and current life may be. There may have been some there from the establishment as well - onlookers, and officials who were there to make sure this rabble-rouser Jesus didn't start an insurrection and have it get out of hand. Others, were there perhaps just as a curiosity to see whether or not this fellow Jesus was the real deal.

Historians of the bible often write how the insane, criminals, the fringe of the day were sent up mountains and hillsides so the regular folks down below didn't have to deal with or see them.

This is where these folks often stayed and lived. It almost reminds me of a ghetto, except in the hills, if you will for the undesirables of the day.

So having just begun his new ministry, where does Jesus go? Not to the corporate box suites, not to the expensive homes where the rich and powerful lived and played, not to the homes of the religious elite of the day. But up to the down and out. To the poorest... To the outsider... To widows...convicts...adulterers... The dregs of the world then. In short, those whom no one else wanted to see or deal with.

And so I envision Jesus that day on that mountain, standing in the midst of a crowd of down and outdoors, looking around intently, slowly gazing at each person. Sizing up who was there. Making eye contact with every single person in the crowd, and every person there whom Jesus met was looking back at him. Hoping that some word or some gesture or some nod would come from Jesus and be directed right at them.

And as he looked at them, he saw deep into their souls somehow and knew what was on the heart of each person in the crowd by the look on their face. Illness. Alienation from family. Poverty. Hunger. Afflictions of all kinds. Shame for having done something terrible perhaps.

And maybe Jesus had a speech prepared for this moment. Maybe the night before he had prepared in his mind what he was going to say to this crowd. Yet when he looked into their eyes this day and saw deep into their souls, maybe he tossed his prepared speech aside and spoke directly to their individual hearts. To their individual longings, right then, right there. Because this is what he needed to do and to say – this place was where he needed to be as he begins his ministry.

And so, looking around, into every eye there that day Jesus begins his sermon with the singular YOU. The singular, individual YOU. Not just all...y'all. But YOU... and You...and You. You...are salt, he would say. And YOU... You are light. These words of Jesus, directed not just at the crowd but at each individual there that day. The singular you. As if to say, I know why you came here. I know your pain. I know you're hurt. I know you're longing. And you are blessed and loved by God. You do have a light to shine... to others. You do have words for the world to see. Don't hide your light, but let it shine for others to see. Even the smallest lamp lights up a whole house, Jesus is saying so let your light so shine! And salt... salt for the Jew... was a symbol of covenant... of God's promise. And YOU have worth... YOU are valued by God... and to the world, no matter how small you may think it may be. You are a child of God's covenant!

Words of hope for the hopeless. Words of affirmation and acceptance for those the world had written off. Words of self-worth for those who have been tossed aside by the government, by the temple, perhaps even by their own family. Jesus knew, or would soon know, exactly how these folks felt, because he too was soon to be mocked and rejected himself

Speaking these words of hope to these outcasts gathered on that mountain this day, to the rich, to the powerful to the temple leadership, to many of the people of that day, Jesus his words *did* indeed sound like foolishness. Jesus' words *did* sound like foolishness to anyone who had half a brain. "How could one born into poverty like this guy speak with such authority?", some would ask. "How could one who had nothing claim to be the king of the Jews?"

Jesus speaks to the crowds then and now, not with plausible words of wisdom, as Saint Paul says in our middle reading today, but with the power of the Holy Spirit, so that their faith, our faith, rests not on human wisdom, but the power of God himself. Faith that has been given to us a gift from God.

In this gathering on this mountain this day, Jesus begins his ministry by looking deep into the eyes and souls of those gathered, reminding them that they have been seen, and acknowledged, and affirmed by God himself. That God has looked deep into their eyes, and knows their pain, knows they're hurt, knows their longing and fears, and affirms their worth when no one else in the world at the time would.

This is the Jesus of the gospels I love so much. The Jesus who speaks directly to us, to me. Jesus looks into my eyes, and my soul and knows me. Me. This is the Jesus who comes to me where I am in my life at that moment, whether I'm ready or not, and says yes, you are loved! Yes you are worthy and beloved regardless of what the world may say or think about you.

And in that I am both frightened - frightened by what Jesus might see. But also given the promise that in Jesus, God knows me and affirms me and cherishes me just as I am. And that is as a beloved child of God. One who has much to give to the world.

I hope that as we continue through the season of Epiphany and Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says the word YOU, he means YOU! not just of y'all. But each one of you individually. Jesus speaks to you. Right where you are. And loves you for who you are. And his words are words of love, welcome, inclusion, and acceptance.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

January, 2023
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