

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Perfect Season: Being Kingdom People
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Isaiah 42:5-9

Matthew 5:1-16

We begin today with a quiz. And the quiz is what do these football teams have in common? And by the way this is a Michigan quiz. The 1904 Michigan Wolverines, the 1913 Michigan State Spartans, the 1925 Eastern Michigan Hurons, the 1913 Western Michigan Broncos and the 1918 Central Michigan Chippewas. The answer is that they all had the perfect season. They were all undefeated. Now for those of you who are statewide football fans, each of those schools had at least two more perfect seasons. All of which is rather remarkable considering how difficult it is to accomplish that feat. Yet, the perfect season is what every team hopes to accomplish before the season begins. And in some ways it is what all of us hope to achieve in every area of our lives. In school we want the perfect 4.0 season. In business we want the “this year’s sales and profits are better than last year’s” perfect season. With our children we want the “they are happy and healthy” season. And there is nothing wrong with this because we are supposed to strive for the perfect season.

I say this because, as Protestants, we believe that we ought to pursue excellence in all things. We are to do so because it means that we are fully using the gifts that God has given us. This is what Presbyterians believed in educating everyone. This is why Presbyterians started colleges and universities. This is why we produce so many leaders in a variety of fields, because we believe that all human beings ought to pursue excellence in their lives. The problem with this pursuit however is we human beings often lose sight of the pursuit and instead focus on the prize, the perfect season. And in so doing, we risk any hope of truly having the perfect season. How so...let me give you a name, Lance Armstrong. Lance Armstrong was a great cyclist. His metabolism and physical gifts were extraordinary. He was always pursuing the perfect season...victory at the Tour de France. Yet somewhere along the way, the prize became more important than the pursuit. He cheated, lied and even sued people who challenged him. He was willing to sell his soul for the prize.

This is the human condition. It is the tendency to confuse pursuing excellence with the prize itself. We see this in businesses overstating their earnings in order to drive up share prices. We see this in Little League baseball teams that cheat by recruiting ineligible players. We see this in students at the Naval Academy who cheat on their ethics exams. We see this in television anchors who create fictional events in order to bolster their reputations. We see this in children, youth and parents who confuse excellence with perfection, which is so often seen as the prize...and they are not the same. Yesterday I was visiting with Hank Borchardt who related a story to me about this that he thought would help me, and here it is. For those of you who may not know, Hank was a long time sailor. At one regatta he was on the dock when a group of 9-10 year olds finished their race. Hank watched as a boy, who had finished fifth out of 35 boats, was approached by his father who said, “We spent good money on your lessons and this

boat and all you can do is finish fifth?” This is complete focus on the prize and not the pursuit. The question then becomes how can we insure that we do not lose focus?

I believe the answer is to practice the virtues of kingdom people, the virtues of those people who are part of the kingdom that God is bringing to earth in and through Jesus the Christ. By practicing kingdom virtues we become reoriented to what truly matters in life. The virtues are like a compass which points us to true north. And where do we find these virtues? One place where we can find them is in the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are, as N.T. Wright puts it, “...a summons to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God’s promised future (God’s kingdom); because that future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth.” (Matthew for Everyone: Part One, pg 38). In other words, the Beatitudes shape us into particular kinds of people who live in a particular way; a way which corresponds to God’s kingdom rule and reign in the world. We become kingdom people living kingdom lives. If we allow these virtues to guide us, then we will be rooted and grounded in the kingdom in such a way that the temptation to confuse the prize with the pursuit will be greatly lessened.

So what does a kingdom life as defined by the Beatitudes look like? The easiest way to find out is to take a quick, and I mean a very quick tour through the Beatitudes. I realize that while this is doing a bit of a disservice to them, it will allow us to catch a glimpse of what the kingdom life looks like. So here we go.

The poor in Spirit are those who know that they are not spiritually self-sufficient and thus are in need of God’s presence and guidance. Those who mourn are those who take upon themselves the hurt of the world. They mourn not only for themselves but for the world around them as it hurts. The meek are those who stand firm in their faith but do not dominate others. They know that they do not have to have their own way in all things. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who work for justice in the world. They are those who provide a voice for the voiceless and seek to empower the powerless. The merciful are those who see the needs of the world around them and offer help where and when they can. They see the best in people and are willing to forgive and show kindness to those others would pass by. The pure in heart are those who have oriented their lives to God and have worked at casting out hate, fear and prejudice. The peacemakers are those who build bridges between people who are estranged because of any reason. Those who are persecuted for righteousness sake are those who are willing to stand for the love of God regardless of the outcome.

Jesus expands on these images of what kingdom people ought to look like with two often overused, yet seldom fully appreciated images. The first is that of salt. Kingdom people are the salt of the earth. In our normal lingo salt of the earth means sort of down to earth, average Joe kind of people. But here it means that kingdom people are to be those who are to strive to keep the world from going bad just as salt was used to keep food from going bad. We are to be the preservative that keeps the world looking and acting like it ought to look if God is in charge. The second image Jesus offers is that of light to the world. This is a theme which Jesus picked up from Isaiah. The kingdom people are to be those who shine God’s light on those places in the world where darkness reigns. We are to be those who show people the way to full and abundant life. We are to show them what excellence looks like so that they too can be kingdom people.

All of this being said, this vision of being Kingdom people runs up against one of the great controlling myths of the world which is, in this world one cannot reach the prize of the perfect season while at the same time being kingdom people. Instead one has to be ruthless because this is a cut-throat,

dog eat dog kind of world. One of the most often refrains I have heard over the years is, "I cannot afford to be a Christian out in the business world." I would argue just the opposite, and if for no other reason than what all of you demonstrate. Over the past six years I have come to know many of you...and some of you rather well. And what I have seen is that you are able to both strive for excellence in a multiplicity of ways, and at the same time live as Kingdom people; being salt and light to the world and making a positive difference in God's creation.

That being said, I want to challenge you to pursue the kingdom virtues found in the Beatitudes. In general, I challenge you to pursue them all. Specifically I challenge you to choose one of the Beatitudes and make it a focus of your living during Lent. Whether it is a striving to be more merciful or to work for justice, I challenge you to choose one and pursue it with excellence, knowing that in so doing it will ground you as a kingdom person now and always. Oh, and then either email me so I know which you are pursuing or put it on our Facebook page so others can be encouraged by your pursuit of kingdom excellence.