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“Kingdom Goggles,” a sermon by Rev. Abigail Henderson, preached at First
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Matthew 5:1-20

I can't think about the Sermon on the Mount without being reminded of “The Life of Brian,” the 1979 film by the British comedy troupe Monty Python. This great piece of religious satire revolves around Brian, a Judean man born in a similar time and place as Jesus, and who, in the course of pursuing a pretty young Jewish rebel, is mistaken for the Messiah. Earlier in the film, he sort of encounters the actual Messiah--Jesus. Brian and his mother are in the way, way back of the huge crowd of listeners who have gathered to hear the Sermon of the Mount. And one of the best jokes of this film, in my opinion, is the fact that no one that far back can understand what Jesus is saying. This exchange occurs between a husband and wife:

-What did he say?

-I think it was 'Blessed are the cheesemakers.'

-Ahh, what's so special about the cheesemakers?

-Well, obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.

It's funny to imagine mis-hearing Jesus' words these days.

Misunderstanding, sure, but mis-hearing--if you've grown up in the church, or America, or really, Western culture at large, you have heard these words. You have heard them in their biblical context and out of it. You have experienced them in art and literature and song. And we're going to hear them again over the next few weeks, as we explore large sections of the Sermon in the Mount in worship.

So, what is the Sermon on the Mount, exactly? Basically, it's a collection of teachings and sayings by Jesus, delivered, according to Matthew, early in his ministry. He's been baptized by John. He's wandered in the desert and resisted temptations by the devil. He's beginning to gather his disciples. Certainly a few miraculous things have happened, but Jesus not yet performed the series of astonishing public miracles that will attract so much dangerous attention. So in other words, this particular sermon is kind of like any sermon, delivered with no special effects. Here, Jesus must establish his credibility with words, among people who have no reason to pay attention to *him*.

If there's one thing that Monty Python got right, it's that the historic Jesus was but one of several Jewish messianic figures wandering around 2,000 years

ago. It was a time of great social turbulence: civil war among Jewish factions in Palestine, Roman occupation, bloody uprisings. In the midst of this chaos, the people remembered what the Hebrew prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel had promised: that a descendent of King David would someday bring peace and prosperity to a broken nation, and most importantly, repair the people's broken relationship with God.

And certain individuals and movements claimed to fulfill those prophecies, both before and after Jesus' time. "Messiah" means "anointed one"--a king chosen by God to usher in a new era. And people were hurting for a new era. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets," Jesus says. "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." What does that fulfillment look like? It looks like the knowledge of the One God filling the whole world. The end to human suffering and the tyranny of evil. The deliverance of the people Israel back to their homeland. The death of death itself.

Whether the historical Jesus thought of himself as a Messiah is a matter of scholarly debate. But we do know that the Gospel writers, telling the story of Jesus after his death, had a challenge: they had to convince readers and listeners that their Messiah was *the* Messiah. Matthew is telling the story of a Jewish Jesus to an early community wrestling with what, exactly, it meant to be Jewish. Jesus is presented as a new Moses, going up the mountain and offering a vision for how

human beings should relate with God. But whereas Moses brings the Word in the form of stone tablets; Jesus brings the Word in the form of himself, his own human body--a fragile vessel bearing the reality of God through time and space.

A radical proposition that would appeal to early followers of Jesus, many of whom truly believed that the world was going to end. According to the German Lutheran theologian Joachim Jeremias, “The Sermon was preached to men who knew that they were standing under a dangerously leaning wall which might at any moment come tumbling down upon them; to men who found themselves in the position of a dying man who knows that he had only a very little time left.” He suggests that the Sermon on the Mount served as an ethic in the face of catastrophe--a guide for how to behave toward one another, and toward God, in the worst of times.

I hope this context is helpful in understanding what is at stake in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ words are not meant for people who are fine, who are content with their lot in life. Jesus’ words do not, cannot perpetuate the status quo. What an irony that preachers and politicians have associated the image of “the city on the hill” with American exceptionalism. And it is our loss, really, that we have grown so accustomed to these sayings of Jesus. It means that something is missing in our relationship with God; some crucial chemistry is not taking place. When Jesus’ words go down like bland food, we are not functioning as the salt we were called

to be; we are not drawing out the depth and richness of this Good News.

So how do we do it? How do we become salty again? I suggest we start by trying to understand the world that Jesus is describing. The Sermon on the Mount can sound like a *prescription*: Dr. Jesus would like us to start blessing the poor, the meek, the poor in spirit, in order to bring about the Kingdom of God. But no! This is a *description*, an observation of reality. Now, that's confusing, because you just have to open the *New York Times*--or look at your own life--to see that mourners are not always comforted, that the meek do not always inherit the earth. That was as true in ancient Israel as it is today.

But there are moments, aren't there? Moments when the world as described by Jesus--the Kingdom of God--breaks through the veil of cynicism and hopelessness, and makes itself apparent. I saw it all the time as a chaplain in city hospitals; in the midst of illness and suffering and violence, there would be these instances of grace that took my breath away. Years ago, during a shift as on-call chaplain at Abbott Northwestern Hospital, I was paged on a cold winter night to come in because someone was dying. I arrived at the Intensive Care Unit expecting to see family gathered around the bedside; instead there was only a nurse. An 86-year-old woman named Mary was in a coma and had been removed from artificial breath support. The nurse and I sat on either side of her. Neither of us knew anything about Mary, only her name and age and affliction. We didn't even know

each other. But by unspoken agreement we stayed there and held Mary's hands as she gently moved from life to death. A beautiful, sad, graceful letting go. On some deep, instinctual level, it just felt right.

And if the Kingdom of God is that time and place where things will be *right*, I witnessed it, for a second. It was as if I put on new glasses--Kingdom goggles, if you will. And you know, the goggles came off again quickly. I had to drive home in the snow at dawn. I had feed the cat. I had to get back to my own life, with all its triumphs and tragedies, large and small. But I'm carrying within me the gift of that experience, that relationship I had the privilege of sharing with Mary and the nurse. At the end of the day, "Kingdom" is all about relationship, and the unexpected ways we connect through love and justice, in spite of our limitations and fears. Feminist theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz encouraged us to replace the word "Kingdom" with "kin-dom." She wrote, "when the fullness of God becomes a day-to-day reality in the world at large, we will all be sisters and brothers--kin to each other."

This world--however broken--presents us over and over with opportunities to be in "right relationship" with our fellow human beings, our creation, and our God. Some of our relationships will be redeemed in this life; some in the next. But that's part of what church is all about. It's about intentionally putting on your "Kin-dom" Goggles and looking at the world, and one another, and ourselves. It's

about hearing Jesus as if he's speaking for the very first time, and then admitting the ways we misunderstand, or mishear, or deny his words. God knows we don't always "do" church right; but blessed are we to have the chance to try, over and over again.

Thanks be to God. Amen.