

This sermon was preached by Professor Ken Cherney on Monday, November 15, 2010, in the chapel at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The sermon was part of seminary family's campus-wide Saints Triumphant festival communion service. Professor Cherney teaches systematics and Old Testament. As the world mission professor, he also travels frequently to teach at the sister seminaries of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference as well as coordinating adjunct teaching assignments that allow others to teach at those seminaries. This sermon is also provided on this web site as an audio file.

Matthew 5:1-12
Saints Triumphant

Imagine that you're a soldier who has been captured behind enemy lines, so that now you are an inmate in a very large prisoner of war camp—one of thousands. The camp functions like a little city. It has its own economy—with cigarettes as the medium of exchange—and its own power structure. At the top is the officer in charge, and the prison guards whom he commands. But the inmates, too, have been divided into groups, and some inmates put over the others in order to help life in camp run smoothly.

As you settle in to life in camp, you see different inmates approaching life in prison differently. You quickly come to realize that the more compliant you are, the easier time you're going to have there in prison. For this reason many inmates have set about becoming model prisoners. They obey the guards and their rules without question. In fact, some go above and beyond the rules. They do everything they can to ingratiate themselves with the guards; they do little chores for them, shining their boots and brushing their uniforms. They let the guards know about troublemakers among the prisoners and keep the guards up to speed on what's really going on in camp. Naturally, this kind of behavior brings these inmates all kinds of rewards. They get lighter work details, a little extra food, less scrutiny from the guards; they get positions of authority, and extra cigarettes.

Because this is the way things work, the camp has come to possess a whole culture of its own. There's a whole system of "camp values." In "camp values," the money you had in your pockets when you were captured—that's all worthless; what counts now are cigarettes. Loyalty to your home country and compassion for your fellow prisoners—those are the things that get punished. Loyalty to the prison system, and looking out for yourself—that's what gets rewarded. For those who have adopted "camp values," for all intents and purposes, life on the outside doesn't exist anymore; it isn't real. Those who forget about the outside altogether—who act as though the outside doesn't exist—are the ones who have the easiest time.

One night as you lie on your bunk, you jot down your observations about all this on a piece of scrap paper you've found. When you're done, you notice it's taken the form of a little poem about life in camp. You've written:

Happy are the realists, for theirs is the key to life in camp.

Happy are those who have learned to look out for Number #1, for they stay warm, well fed, and comfortable.

Happy are those who are feared, who have learned the art of intimidation, for it is they whom nobody messes with.

Happy are you when the guards chat you up and joke around with you and praise you, for when that happens, great is your reward—right now.

Get the picture? The inmates—that's you and me, the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. Here we are, trapped in a place that is not our home, whose culture is not our culture and that operates by values that are not our values. For disciples of Jesus, this world is beyond a prison camp; it's actually a kind of Bizarro World, where evil is called good and good evil and everything is upside down. This world heaps praise on and rewards everything our Father in Heaven detests, and it detests what our Father loves. A set of beatitudes for this world might read something like this:

Blessed are the pushy and arrogant, for everyone gets out of their way.

Blessed are those who've learned the fine art of putting themselves first, while managing to look like they're doing the opposite, for they are the ones who receive greater authority—and more cigarettes.

Blessed are those who dedicate their lives to the cultivation of their appetites, whose motto is "More!" "Fancier!" "Better!"--for they are the ones everyone admires.

Blessed are the impure in heart, who are proud of their impurity, who parade their impurity on reality TV shows--for it is they who live on the edge for us and push back the boundaries for us; we all owe them a debt of gratitude.

Blessed are you when the world sees you as no threat at all, when it likes you and praises you. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward—right here, right now.

And if you doubt that these are the world's values, look what happened when somebody came into this prison, taught differently, and lived differently. Who was less arrogant and more 'poor in spirit' than the Lord Jesus, who made himself nothing and took on the form of a servant? Who mourned more deeply than Jesus at what he saw around him; who hungered and thirsted more deeply for the righteousness that here is nowhere to be found? Who cared less about what those in power thought of him—but had all the time in the world for the downtrodden and the guilt-ridden and the sad? Who was purer in heart than Jesus, gentler than Jesus, more merciful than Jesus?

And exactly what'd it get him? What it got him was that those in power saw immediately the threat Jesus represented. Oh, they talked to him—they gave him his chance, but what we obviously had here was a failure to communicate. What was he trying to do, bring the Romans down on our necks and get us all killed? Telling people that the ones on top, the scribes and the Pharisees, were closer to hell than the prostitutes! Telling people that all their righteousness was worthless and that what they needed most from God was forgiveness! What was he trying to do—turn the whole moral universe upside down, and upset the whole delicate balance that made life in the camp possible? And so, the guards did the only thing they could do. They came down

on him, and hard. They made an example of him. Tried and found guilty—immediately. Spit on. Whipped and beaten. Crucified. Dead. And buried. That's the way he wants it; well, he gets it. "Blessed are the meek," indeed. Thank goodness that's the end of that.

Except—it wasn't. On the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from where he will come again to judge the living and the dead. What of course Jesus had done, having come to teach us that this is not normal; it's Bizarro World—what he had done was to break out, in pretty much the only way you can—by dying. And now, from the seat of power over all the universe, he is gathering his forces and preparing D-day. On that day, it will be his captors and tormentors and the captors and tormentors of God's people who will find that their world has been turned upside down. They will be running for their lives; they will find that the world has suddenly become too small for them. The barbed wire will come down. This world will disappear with a roar. Its culture and values will be a memory.

And we'll be back on the outside—at last. We will have rejoined our brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers and grandfathers and grandmothers, the Saints Triumphant, who have already been broken out and are waiting for us on the outside. Instead of a camp, there will be—a kingdom.

This is a kingdom ruled, not by an enemy officer and his guards, but by a lamb who was slain. And camp values will be replaced by kingdom values. In the kingdom, those who are rewarded and praised—who shine like the stars forever and ever—will be those who have been loyal to the home country; those who, no matter how rough things got, always remembered who they are. Treachery and intimidation and selfishness and perversion are banished from this kingdom forever. Those who have hated these things and mourned over them and hungered and thirsted for a different kind of world will have one—at last. This will be a world where good is not called evil, it's called good, where everybody knows that cigarettes aren't the purpose of life, they're cigarettes; that the one who dies with the most toys doesn't win, he's dead; and the one who wins the rat race isn't a winner; he's a rat.

Above all, this is a kingdom where we don't have to elbow our way in by shoving somebody aside, where you don't climb to the top by stepping over everybody else, where you don't spend all your time looking out for #1, because you don't have to. We don't have to earn a place or fight for a place or prove that we belong. Have no fear, little flock, Jesus said. The Father is pleased to give you the kingdom. It's a gift, and it's yours.

And if all that is true, if D-Day and the kingdom are on the way, if we have heroes and loved ones who are there already now; if the time is drawing near for our weeping to turn to dancing and all our longings to be satisfied; if that day's coming is so near and so certain that, if you've noticed, even the guards here in the camp look a little nervous once in a while—why wouldn't that make all the difference in the world for us, not just then, but already now? Doesn't this mean that the purpose for which most people are living—getting what they want and avoiding what they don't, enjoying pleasure and avoiding pain,—that's not just silly; it's dangerous? Isn't the main thing to prepare for the kingdom now, to live as if it were here

already, and to spread the news that the kingdom is on the way? Isn't the main thing to keep reminding each other who we really are, what our values really are, and where we really belong—what's real and what's not; what's going to be gone very soon, and what's going to last?

If we do that, no matter what kind of work detail we happen to pull and no matter what the camp tries to do to us—every so often, the guards might notice a little smirk on our faces that nothing can wipe away.

In fact, every so often, on days like today, they're going to catch us—singing.

Amen.