

I would like to begin this morning by asking the question, what is the difference between art and kitsch? It is more than a matter of style or subject matter. May I suggest that the difference between these two categories refers more explicitly to the relationship between the piece and the person.

Let us for our first example this morning discuss Precious Moments figurines – art or kitsch? Though some of you may be scandalized by this comment, Precious Moments is kitsch. It is intended to make us feel good about ourselves through an appeal to sentimentality. We say, “Isn't that nice, isn't that wait for it ... precious.” But this is the point. Kitsch leaves us exactly where we are. In fact it *petrifies* us – it solidifies our natural self-centered proclivities. The same thing can be said for pop music. Of course even that title suggests its purpose. “Pop” music, Popular music, is design to be popular. It is designed to sell easily. It is designed to make money because it demands nothing of the listener. It again reinforces us as we are. It gives us what we want. We use it. We own it. We have it for ourselves. It appeals to our sin nature – much of it very explicitly. Kitsch, popular music, and the like are things which are *used*. They are products.

Art, however, does not lend itself to being used. It usually is not easily grasped – it requires work to be enjoyed. Art calls us out of ourselves, to reveal to us something truly beautiful. It cannot be possessed or owned, even though one might physically own the recording or the painting. Art always challenges us and reveals more to us as we become more and more familiar with it. Art is not to be used, but must be received.

Take for example, the music of Bach. Many argue that Bach was the greatest musician of all time. In his counterpoint, he interwove melody and mathematics into a gorgeous tapestry of sound and meaning. The more one listens and studies his work, the more one is astounded that such music came from the mind of a human being. Or consider Rembrandt's *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem*. The prophet gazes at The City Jerusalem, home to the temple of the most high God and the capital of His covenant people, as it burns before his eyes. Jeremiah watches in utter disbelief, unable to comprehend what he is witnessing. Both works reflect truth to those who will learn from them. Such art isn't to be trifled with.

Art, then, calls us out of ourselves; by doing so, our true self is revealed to ourselves. It makes us better people, if we will receive it, if we will let it in to our life. True art points us to the divine; for God, like art, cannot be clutched at nor used, but must be received.

Our lessons today help us unpack this idea more. The gospel this morning, from the fifth chapter of St. Matthew, is the famous Sermon on the Mount which begins with the Beatitudes.

Beatitudes. The commonly known title is from the first verse of the chapter. It begins:

And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him:

And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And yet our lesson this morning, taken a few verses after the Beatitudes, starts, "For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." What is going on here? In verse 3, Christ says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," but yet in this verse, we read that if one's righteousness does not exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, that one cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. Though we didn't read it today, the chapter also ends with this verse: "8 Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." So we are to be perfect, perfected in righteousness. But "poor in Spirit" suggests that we can't be perfectly righteous. At the same time, our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. Is Jesus being impossible here?

Remember that to the Pharisees, righteousness was about what one did. Moses gave the commandments, and it was the duty of every Jew to obey every commandment all of the time. One's behavior was the way to holiness, to righteousness, to perfection. But let's be real here. No one is perfect, not even those Pharisees. And yet, as far as external obedience to the law was concerned, they were likely more righteous than other people. But Christ says that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, one's righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. In so many words, Christ is saying that their righteousness is insufficient to merit God's acceptance. They are lacking. They are not righteous enough! And we are supposed to surpass this?

Christ goes on to explain why the Pharisaical righteousness was insufficient.

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, that whosoever is

angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell-fire.

In the Mosaic law, murder was specifically condemned (the 6th Commandment) and was punishable by death (Num. 35:31). But here, Christ says that not only killing is to be judged, but anger, an internal attitude, is likewise judged. He continues by saying that our imprudent speech may render us liable to civil penalties, but that the attitudes of our hearts will render us liable to divine, perhaps eternal, judgment. External actions are condemned by the law, but attitudes of the heart, the hate and contempt with which we consider others, likewise disqualify us from claiming to be righteous.

Later in the chapter Christ subjects the sin of adultery to the same treatment. We are explicitly prohibited from physical adultery (7th commandment). But Christ goes deeper. He hits us in the heart. Verse 28 reads, "But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." We are not holy if we are focused only upon external behavior. More than that, under both standards, we stand as condemned people. No one is justified, no one is righteous, before God. How then shall we be saved? How is our righteousness to exceed that of the Pharisees and still be poor in spirit?

First of all, God is not something that we can attain to, that we can grasp for, ourselves. We cannot make ourselves holy enough for God. The Pharisees did not understand this. They were obedient in the commandments (though not perfectly I would contend), but they missed the primary point. They treated God as a product. "If I do X, then I get Y." God will not be mocked in this manner. God will not be used. The Pharisaical model is transactional, but God desires transformation. God will not be used and neither will He use us. God desires union, not using.

But still we are left with a conundrum. How do we become perfect? How are we to be poor in Spirit? How can our righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees? The answer? We can't. When we ask these questions, we are still thinking in human terms. Rather the question we should be asking is, "Who can?"

The transition for us is found just before our gospel reading this morning. In Matthew chapter 5, verses 17-19 which state:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no

wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

The key here is that Christ came to fulfill the law, all of it, every jot and tittle – both the external ordinances and the internal attitudes. Christ was the perfect teacher of the law for He transforms the heart. Christ is He who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In other words, Christ was obedient to the law because Christ *loved* God and man perfectly. Is this not what we confess every Sunday? Love is the basis of the Law.

Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith:

THOU shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

The Law of God is not primarily about rules. It is primarily about love. The key to perfect obedience to the law and to the fulfillment of the mandates of the Beatitudes is love, and more explicitly, the perfect love that Christ had for God and for man.

The question for us remains, how is what Christ has done applied to us? How do we have the exceeding righteousness of Christ? How do we incarnate the holiness of the Beatitudes into our lives? How can we be transformed by the love of Christ? Remember, God cannot be used. He must be received.

How is he received? By faith leading to baptism. The two go together, for baptism is the sacrament which brings us into the Body of Christ. But baptism without faith, any sacrament without faith, availeth nothing. In the epistle this morning, St. Paul says,

KNOW ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

So in baptism, we die. Earlier in the epistle to the Romans, St. Paul states, the wages of sin is death (6:23). This is what God declared to Adam and Eve in the Garden, “For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” (Gen 2:17) We do not escape this death, but in Christ, it no longer has to be the death of perdition. If we desire to live eternally in the kingdom of God, we must first die. Therefore in faith, in the waters of baptism, we die with Christ. We die to ourselves. We no longer have a spirit of sin for in the death of baptism, that

old man dies, but the new man is risen with a new spirit, the Spirit of God. We return from the cleansing waters alive in Christ to God; regenerated with the Holy Spirit. It is in baptism that we receive God, freely, unmerited, given in love. In baptism we are united with Christ so that His perfect life, His righteousness, and His love become ours.

This sacrament is both a completion and a beginning for us. We are baptized in the Name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit only one time; it is complete and objective. God works this in us once and for all. We cannot baptize ourselves, we can only receive this salvation, the love of God for us. It is the reality of a single moment in our lives. And in this sacrament, our transformation begins for we are called to make it real in our lives. Melville Scott puts it this way: "In the power of His death we are to be always dying, and in the power of His life to be always living." So there is a daily appropriating of the grace of baptism in our lives. In the words of the apostle, "Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

We are saved in the waters of baptism. It is the love of God poured out for us. We can't demand this. It remains impossibly out of reach for us if we presume to earn it, to grasp it for ourselves. Baptism is a rejection of the man-centered, Pharisaical approach which attempts to use God. It is rather an embracing of God as He is offered to us freely in Jesus Christ. We can't assert our own worthiness; what in us is worthy on our own? Instead, we must, in poverty of spirit, receive the love of God. And in receiving this love, we are united with Him so that Christ's righteousness fulfills the entirety of the Law on our behalf. We are resurrected, no longer the persons we were. And as the love of Christ in the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our hearts, we ourselves are made holy, so that in our thoughts and actions, we reflect the love that we have been shown. God is our portion. He is our inheritance, freely given, freely received. And just as we have received Him in baptism, may we always hunger to receive Him in the Eucharist. By God's grace, may we always behold Jesus. And by God's grace may we become what we behold. Amen.