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**Matthew 6:1-4. NLT**

*“Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. <sup>2</sup> When you give to someone in need, don’t do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. <sup>3</sup> But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. <sup>4</sup> Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you”*

**Mark 10:13-16. NLT**

<sup>13</sup> *One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch and bless them. But the disciples scolded the parents for bothering him.*

<sup>14</sup> *When Jesus saw what was happening, he was angry with his disciples. He said to them, “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. <sup>15</sup> I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn’t receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” <sup>16</sup> Then he took the children in his arms and placed his hands on their heads and blessed them.*

**The wrong bus.**

I grew up in a town named Oxnard, in southern California. When I got to be a little older, I rode my bike to school most days. But in the early grades, I took a public city bus. When we moved to Oxnard, I was in second grade, and class had

been under way for about a month. The first day I went to school, I climbed onboard the bus near our house and got to school just fine. But that afternoon, when I went to the city bus stop near my school, I discovered that there were three busses picking kids up. I don't remember how I chose which bus to get on – but, as it turned out, my algorithm - whatever it was - wasn't very good. The bus started out filled with kids, and as we wound through the town, kids got off here, then there, then at other stops. After a while, as I stared out the windows, I grew increasingly concerned that I was not anywhere near where I lived. The houses looked very different. They were older, two-story houses, not newer, small, stucco ranch-style houses like the one we had just moved into. I became very nervous. Then, several more blocks went by – and I noticed that I was the only kid left on the bus. That's when true panic set in. It suddenly hit me that the bus was near the end of its route, and I was very, very far from home.

But let's pause that story for a moment and look at our first Bible quote.

This is part of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. Note that Matthew did not call it the Sermon on the Mount; he didn't even call it a sermon. It is simply a scene that takes place on a hillside, with a large crowd gathered around Jesus.

This scene occurs near the beginning of Jesus' ministry and contains the longest of his sermons or verbal presentations recorded in the New Testament. The actual

location isn't known. Tradition has it that the location was a large hill called Karn Hattin, and there is now a church there that is called the Church of the Beatitudes. The reason for the name of this church is that part of this sermon is referred to as the Beatitudes; the word means "blessedness", and each one begins with "Blessed are...", such as "Blessed those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God." The Sermon on the Mount has had a very dramatic impact on Christian theology and doctrine, and it is fundamental to our faith. Saint Augustine called it "a perfect standard of the Christian life". Since we are in Lent, and we should be thinking about what our faith means to us in our lives, I thought it would be good to include a bit of the Sermon on the Mount in our message today.

In our passage, which occurs near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, there are people who are described as blowing trumpets to celebrate someone giving to charity. At this time, giving to the poor was considered an essential aspect of being a faithful Jew. By the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, Christians had picked up the same practice. And the bit about trumpets is no metaphor. They really did this. People would blow trumpets to draw attention to particularly generous gifts. A subtlety is that the word that is translated to "hypocrite" in this passage is actually, in the original Greek

manuscripts, the word “hypokrites”, which does NOT mean hypocrite. It’s a bad translation, as the word actually means “actor”. So what Jesus is saying here is that the people who give money to the poor and then blow trumpets to celebrate their gifts are acting. They are pretending to be generous people. The implication is that they are the opposite: they are actually selfish, and if they weren’t getting attention for their acts, they certainly wouldn’t be doing it.

I’m going to try to weave this into our second passage. It’s a scene we’ve looked at before. The passage contains one of the most tender descriptions of Jesus in the Gospels. In it, some kids have been brought to Jesus so that he could bless them. The disciples get upset at this, presumably because Jesus is an important guy and he has better things to do than mess with kids. But Jesus pulls these kids close to him and declares: *“I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn’t receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.”* Notice that this sounds backwards. It says that the kids can receive the Kingdom of God, not that the Kingdom of God will receive the kids. While the Kingdom of God isn’t some possession that someone can own, it is something that can be enjoyed almost as if we do own it, especially if we have the right attitude. That attitude is one of openness and willingness – which are attributes we associate with innocent children. We, as adults, should be equally innocent. Rather than seeing the Kingdom of God as something we have a right to obtain or that makes us better than other people, it’s simply something that brings incredible joy into our lives. This story is actually more powerful than most

readers of the Bible realize. Keep in mind that it is a modern, western notion that says we should view kids in a warm, romantic way. Back then, in Jesus' society, kids weren't viewed as being fully human and they were often kept away from adults. So, Jesus is doing something radical here. He's saying that these little non-persons actually portray perfect examples of how we should behave. We should embrace God the way these children embrace Jesus.

Importantly, a handful of verses after our passage, and during this same scene in which Jesus and his disciples are making the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus is going to say to his twelve disciples: *"we're going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die and hand him over to the Romans. <sup>34</sup> They will mock him, spit on him, flog him with a whip, and kill him, but after three days he will rise again."* We see that the Sermon on the Mount is an important point in Jesus' ministry. He's on his way to make his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, where he rides into the city in a procession, as people crowd along the path, laying branches down in front of him. Our passage occurs as Jesus is busily laying out what he believes to be the most important aspects of being a person of genuine faith. His words say that we should be innocent in the way we embrace God. But he is also teaching via his actions. He is living a life of faith for

us to observe. That example culminates in his ride into Jerusalem. He is everything that the religious leaders and wealthy people of his society are not – and the faithful come out in vast numbers to acknowledge this, and as a result, the government will soon want to kill him. Importantly, he's not riding high on a donkey to feel good about himself – because he knows he's going to die for it.

And what do we see him doing? Being extraordinarily good to children. Jesus is extremely kind to these kids whom society normally rates as being even lower than the poor people to whom our false givers in our first passage give donations. He pulls them toward him and then makes it clear that they are a fine example of how true believers should behave. Putting together first the second passage and then the first passage, we 1, see an example of a great act of kindness, and 2, learn that the best acts of kindness are those for which we get no credit.

And I got treated similarly on that public bus. The driver was doing his job - and getting paid not very much for it. As it turned out, when he got to the last stop, he turned around and glanced at the back of the bus. There I was, sitting alone, scared frozen. He told me that he was at the end of his route and that this was the end of his shift. He had no extra responsibility to me, expect to perhaps

have the cops come and pick me up at the bus depot after he drove his bus back there. But instead, he got up and walked back to me. Now, I have to say that Oxnard is a bit of a rough area. I lived in a part that was largely Hispanic. But the bus was stopped deep in the African American part of town. I imagined myself getting off in a place that was totally alien to me, without any idea of how to get home.

“Wrong bus?” he said to me with a warm smile. I nodded. There was no one to see what he was about to do. Nobody was going to play trumpets for him. He tousled my hair. “It’s okay,” he said. “Where do you live?” I had my address memorized, as my older sister had taught me, and I spat it out. He nodded. “You are in the wrong place,” he said. Then he told me to go sit in the front row of the bus. He proceeded to drive me all the way home, and he dropped me off right in front of my house.

He didn’t get out of the bus so my mother could acknowledge his kindness. He just grinned and wrote down the number of the correct bus home from school. He said, “Put that in your uniform pants, there. That’s the bus to take home tomorrow. Make sure the bus has that number on the front of it.” I went

inside my house and told my mother about my misadventure. She darted outside, but the bus had driven away.

I've told this story about my errant bus trip many times. I have to say that after this, I was very careful to check the number of the bus before climbing aboard, and for several days after this incident, I watched the route the bus took and did not feel relaxed until I started to recognize my neighborhood. I don't know if that bus driver was a Christian. Back then, most people in my town would have attended church somewhere. But whether he attended a church or not, whether he was pious or thought that church was a boring waste of time, he showed me how to live the way Jesus taught us to live. He was African American, by the way. And he had an impact on me.

I'd like to end with a passage from Luke, now that we've heard from Matthew and Mark. Here, Jesus is speaking. Interestingly, people call this the Sermon on the Plain, because it is similar in content to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, but in it, Jesus is speaking at the foot of a mountain, where the ground is level:

*<sup>27</sup> "But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. <sup>28</sup> Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you. <sup>29</sup> If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other cheek also. If someone demands*

*your coat, offer your shirt also. <sup>30</sup> Give to anyone who asks; and when things are taken away from you, don't try to get them back. <sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would like them to do to you.*

*<sup>32</sup> "If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them! <sup>33</sup> And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much! <sup>34</sup> And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return.*

*<sup>35</sup> "Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. <sup>36</sup> You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate."*

Maybe there's one more thing we could add to our lesson for today. It's Lent and we're busy thinking about what our faith truly means to us, and how far we are willing to go to live like a true Christian. We should treat people with kindness. We shouldn't do it because we want credit for being generous. And yes, we should be kind even to people who are decidedly not kind to us.