

Pastor's Message – 1/29/2023
Matthew 5:1-12
Micah 6:6-8

Almost three years ago now, we did a Lent study on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the Ash Wednesday focus was on The Beatitudes as Matthew records them which we are focusing on again this year. We even have a banner from that study.

Some who have been in the Church a long time or those who read their Bibles and, perhaps, even some outside the Church will recognize the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are some of the most often quoted teachings of Jesus, and you probably remember them in an older translation:

The Beatitudes

- ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit,
- ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,
- ⁵ Blessed are the meek,
- ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
- ⁷ Blessed are the merciful,
- ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart,
- ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,
- ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
- ¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. New International Version (NIV)

Hearing them in that way, we may be inclined to overlook them and put them aside. These words that we call "Beatitudes" are addressed to people we don't want to be. We don't want to be poor in spirit. We don't want to be people who mourn. We don't want to be meek or hungry, and if being merciful means forgiving our enemies, we certainly want to think twice about that one. Being pure in heart means we have to give up all of our impurities and most of us cling to them. It is the same for being a peacemaker; more often than not we want to carry the grudge. We certainly don't want to be persecuted or reviled. So, it would seem that when Jesus addresses the crowd on the side of the mountain, he isn't really talking to us. He might be talking to the person sitting next to you, but certainly not to you. He might be speaking

to the church down the street, but not to us here in these pews. He isn't talking to me!

The crowds gathered to hear Jesus' first major teaching discourse (5:3-7:27) as recorded in the gospel of Matthew heard something different too, and probably expected the familiar, comforting guidelines of traditional wisdom sayings. Conventional Jewish wisdom taught that right behavior resulted in rewards, that certain human actions would guarantee specific outcomes. Earlier beatitudes (e.g. those in Proverbs or Psalms) testified to this predictable equation of divine rewards and punishments. Wisdom Psalm 128:1-2, "Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in obedience to him. You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours," illustrates the characteristic beatitude form and standard formula: declaration of happiness; description of that happiness; promise of rewards following evidence of that specific attitude.

While Matthew's beatitudes adhere strictly to this traditional form, their content reveals that something new has been added to the standard beatitude recipe. The beatitudes Jesus pronounces are highly spiced with an eschatological message, i.e., the idea of someday, ... Happiness, fulfillment will come, but only after the Lord's Day and in the Lord's Time.

The first problem that faces any interpreter, that faces anyone who hears the Beatitudes or reads the Beatitudes or tries to preach on the Beatitudes is the very first word, "Blessed," many translations render it. "Happy," say others. The Greek is *makarioi* -- a term that's difficult to translate. Douglas Hare, in his *Matthew* commentary in the Interpretation series (Westminster/John Knox, 1993, p. 35), points out that the word has a connotation of good luck, or good fortune. Those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, and so on, are not accursed -- as the world commonly imagines. Rather, they are fortunate, hence the word, blessed. They are blest because God favors those who struggle and suffer. So, with that in mind, let's hear a reading from the gospel of Matthew 5:1-12: The Beatitudes.

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So, what can we learn from these counterintuitive realities? For starters, we need to realize that these blessings, known as the Beatitudes, are not descriptions of human feelings. When Jesus says that we are "blessed," he is not saying that we are necessarily "happy." To be

reviled and persecuted because you follow the Lord might turn out to be a blessing (v. 11), but it is not going to make you feel particularly cheerful. The nine Beatitudes which Jesus proclaims in this passage are so much more than nine “be-happy-attitudes.”

To be blessed, in this case, is to be made privileged or fortunate by the action of God. It carries with it a sense of salvation and peace and well-being. You might say that the opposite of blessed is not “unhappy.” Rather, the opposite of blessed is “cursed.” To be blest is to be given the gift of divine favor, a gift that we all have a deep human hunger to receive.

Stated this way, it's clear that the blessing of the Beatitudes is not about us, and it's not about how we feel. Instead, it's all about what God has done for us.

The poor in spirit. The mourning. The meek. Those who hunger for righteousness. The pure in heart. The merciful. The peacemakers. The persecuted peacemakers. The slandered, insulted, and persecuted peacemakers. These are the people of God's world.

When we are following the Beatitudes, we'll find ourselves blessed, not cursed.

Perhaps we are also what Jesus calls “the meek” (v. 5) — gentle people who are trying to reject the power-hungry and violent ways of the world we live in.

Or we are men and women who hunger and thirst for righteousness (v. 6) by actively doing the will of God.

Maybe we are “pure in heart” (v. 8), willing to show the world in word and deed that there is nothing more life-changing than single-minded devotion to God.

Or we are “merciful” (v. 7), showing others the very gift that we are so anxious to receive for ourselves.

These are not mistakes or misspellings, as strange as they look to us. Instead, they are kingdom-based qualities that can open the door to inner peace and everlasting salvation.

Let's make a place for them.

The challenge for us is to open ourselves to God's kingdom, and receive this radical new reality that Jesus is inscribing on our hearts and thus making a place for the Beatitudes.

What if the Beatitudes were a snapshot of the community of faith instead of a measuring rod? What if Jesus was saying, Blessed is the church which makes room for peacemakers? Blessed is the church which

makes room for the meek, for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who are poor in spirit. Blessed is the church which makes room those who mourn at the brokenness of the world, who is unstained by the impurity of the world. Blessed is the church who knows persecution is inevitable and still decides to make room for those the world thinks are unimportant."

When we follow the Beatitudes, we see the presence of God in the world in a new way. It helps us to live in a way that is pleasing to God and which brings God closer. It gives our lives a new meaning.

As we heard in our reading from the prophet Micah, people were asking, "What must I do to be blest?" Micah responds for God,

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

The task of the Church, and every church, is to live these words. What does it mean to "do" justice? It is not just a matter of wishing for fairness and equality, but we must actively work for it.

What does it mean to love kindness? Remember, 1 Corinthians 13 says that love bears, hopes, believes, and endures. Love is not a mushy platitude, as though one could write a frilly Valentine to kindness and thus fulfill this requirement from Micah 6:8. It's hard to love. Love demands that the lover work, care and suffer. It takes more than a bumper sticker to love. It combines love, loyalty, and faithfulness.

As for walking humbly, Paul gets at that in his advice to the Christians in Corinth. They're not wise, virtuous, or strong. God is. The Corinthians should be modest, just as all of us should be. Life is not about us. It's about what the Lord can do through us. How the Lord's justice and mercy may take root here and now. It will not be easy. It cannot be easy. We may not be happy in the conventional sense, but the only faithful thing to do is to try.

These three things that are required of God's people encompass the whole of our lives and all of our relationships. Humility, justice, and kindness. These are the marks and characteristics of righteousness. This is what it means to live the good life. The people of God are called to be like God: humble, just, and kind. This is what it means to be blessed.