

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
February 2, 2020

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Micah 6:6-8
Matthew 5:3-12

I Have Been Blessed



The Sea of Galilee from the Mount of Beatitudes

Arriving at a quiet place, Jesus sat down and taught his companions.
This is what he said:

'You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and God's rule. You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.'

Matthew 5:2-4 The Message paraphrase of the New Testament
by Eugene Peterson

Let us begin with a prayer:

Great God, with what shall we come before you? We bring our hopes, our fears, our gratitude, and our love. We come with our frustration over the way things are – in our lives and in this world that you so love. We come with an awareness that we have been blessed, so much more than we deserve, and yet... at times we feel incomplete, as though something is missing. We come wanting to be different and make a difference. Please help us, Giving God, help us to see the world through Jesus' eyes. Give us courage to draw near to one another and to you, and show us the true meaning of blessedness, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

I have been blessed
With so much more than I deserve
To be here with the ones
That love me
To love them so much it hurts
I have been blessed. ⁱ

The multi-talented singer/songwriter Martina McBride belted out those lines in a song that went to number one of the country music charts in the early 2000's. It's about gratitude. The song, and the passion the singer brings to it, resonates with many people who understand that they have, we have been blessed -- that we have received grace upon grace from the hand of God. Blessing is unmerited favor, so much more than I deserve.

Kobe Bryant often said this, particularly after he returned to the Lakers following a series of injuries that kept him sidelined. A lot has been reported about the NBA star's rock solid faith in Jesus Christ, and the great work he did off the court with Make a Wish, as well as serving the needs of the homeless and underprivileged youth.

There is a great longing in us for that kind of authenticity. People experienced Jesus' authenticity, and they were drawn to it. We are still attracted to integrity when we see it. On the contrary, we're tired of bombastic "Christians," and so called-believers who say one thing and do another, others who seem to have never heard *love your neighbor as yourself*. Some wear the Christ label for personal or political gain. We're tired of that, and our young people are particularly sensitive to it.

No one is perfect, well only One was. The rest of us are here because we are genuinely trying, as best we can, to become more and more like Jesus. We want to be authentic followers of him, and it isn't easy. There's a lot of disagreement about what that looks like, and I'm not sure why. He was so clear and nowhere more than in the Sermon on the Mount.

This is Jesus' inaugural address, his most famous speech, and the summary of everything he taught. Over the next few weeks we're going to look at excerpts from the Sermon of the Mount. Jesus' speech begins with a series of blessings, or commendations. You might think that Jesus would have started by commending people who were heroes – people of moral and spiritual strength, and exceptional kindness, but that's not what he did.ⁱⁱ Instead, he talked about the joy of people who know they have been blessed and those who recognize their need for God.

Listen to the words of Jesus from the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel. Matthew says that when Jesus saw the crowds of people that were following him, he took his closest disciples away from the crowd, up the mountain, and began to teach – sharing the radical, authentic truth about God's kingdom. He said:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You can go there, to the mountain where Jesus sat with his disciples and said these things, at least, as tradition has it. Archeologists and historians have done their best to locate this place on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. As you stand on that hillside, it's easy to imagine Jesus sitting with his dearest ones, talking for hours, gazing out over the water.

There's been a church on that spot since the fourth century. The current church is called The Church of the Beatitudes, from the Latin word for "blessed." It was designed by the famous architect, Antonio Barluzzi (Bar-loot'-zee). It is stunning. Our parish associate, Corinne Baker and her late husband, Wesley were married there in 1985. When our Woods pilgrimage visited the Mount of Beatitudes, we were able to celebrate the Lord's Supper on that hillside.



One day, not long after they made the decision to follow him, Jesus sat on a hillside with his disciples to tell them about his hopes and expectations for them. Each one of them had made the monumental decision to walk away from what he was doing to join what Jesus was doing. They left behind their businesses, their source of purpose and blessing – work as fishermen, tax collectors and other trades. They left their families. He needed to make it clear to them how this discipleship thing was going to be. So he sat down, the way rabbis did, to indicate he was about to say something important. Jesus sat down and he said, essentially:

“God has an agenda. God’s hopes, God’s dreams and expectations – they are sometimes, no they are usually very different from what the world calls ‘blessed.’”

He went on, trying to explain, but they had trouble listening. We still do. We post #blessed on social media whenever we receive something we don’t really deserve. Okay, maybe YOU don’t, but I do. We say “God bless you” when someone sneezes, but according to Jesus, blessing also comes from being reviled and persecuted. I wouldn’t wish that on anybody. One of the kids asked me, “What if God sneezes? What are you supposed to say?”

At Bible study on Wednesday, Peggy remembered Mordred, the most worldly, proud-to-be-a-sinner character in the play Camelot. Mordred sang, “It’s not the earth the meek inherit; it’s the dirt.”ⁱⁱⁱ Novelist, Kurt Vonnegut hit a little closer to home when he said that if we would just pay attention to what Jesus calls a blessing, the world would be a much less painful place. He noticed that:

“Christians ... never mention the Beatitudes. But, often with tears in their eyes, [Christians] demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings.”

He continued:

“I haven’t heard one [Christian] demand that ... the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere.”^{iv}

How come? Probably because these sayings are radical, even subversive. Jesus’ idea of blessing completely upends our consumer values. Watch the Super Bowl ads tonight and count how many ads try to get you to hunger and thirst for righteousness. None? No! They want us to thirst for Mountain Dew and hunger for Cheetos, Snickers, Pringles, and Hyundais, but no call for mercy, or purity of heart, no ads for peacemaking. Why is that?

One reason is that Jesus says not all the blessed are winners. It's okay to lose. In fact, sometimes it's better. Tell that to the Chiefs and the 9ers.

There was a little guy about four years old who had been watching football with his dad. One Sunday he decided to stay in church for the whole service. He watched as the pastor came to the center at the end of the service to pronounce the blessing. When she raised her arms like this, the little guy shouted, "Touchdown!"

In his most famous lesson Jesus taught that the ones who are blessed by God are more like the Prodigal Son, who knelt at his father's feet and said, *I'm not worthy to be called your son...* more blessed than his successful older brother who thought he had his life all buttoned up in a nice neat package. The Prodigal represents the one who needs God: the one who is grieving, the one who is poor in spirit, the one who receives mercy.

It's hard for us to think that way; what we've been taught is so different. But if we want to follow Jesus we have to get in line with his values, what he calls blessed. And it's hard. How many times have you gone into a job interview and, when asked about your strengths you said, "I'm exceptionally meek"? Maybe you should. The best definition of a meek person is – one who refuses to use privilege for personal gain, but who uses it, instead for the sake of others. It's the same for humility. Those who are humble don't find their blessing in security or entertainment. The humble aren't blessed by what they accumulate or attain; the humble find their blessing in a relationship with God.

If that's not what you were taught, you aren't alone. Most of us were not taught this way. And we're paying a high price for that.

We talk a lot in our community about the struggles our young people face. Our kids are overscheduled, overstimulated, and over gifted with toys, trips, and technology. They have little time to just be kids – play outdoors, experience nature.

I don't get to spend as much time as I'd like with our young people, but when I do they nearly always tell me how tired they are; some admit they feel mentally and physically exhausted most of the time.

There is one week of the year though when they rarely ever mention fatigue. Know when it is? Christmas? Spring break? No. It's WoodsWork. For nine days in the summer Woods youth live, often without air conditioning, in a church or school gym. They sleep on air mattresses. They eat grub we prepare; they wait in long lines for showers, after sweating all day in the summer sun building Habitat for Humanity houses and doing other service work.

I visit WoodsWork as often as I can. What always lures me back is the kids' unshakeable trust in God. They are doing extraordinarily difficult work – framing, roofing. Sometimes the adults look like they are about to keel over by the time I arrive, but the kids are fresh – and so happy. Why? Because they have found the key – the blessing in giving each day to God. They are doing

exactly what the lector just read for us – they are doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.

WoodsWork youth always tell me how they don't want it to end. They are sad that they have to go back "to the real world," but I wonder. Which one's the real world? Why can't every day of our lives be about doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God?

Jesus said:

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Why aren't we teaching our kids that mercy, purity of heart and peacemaking are our highest values?

Can we listen to our young people? Can we trust them to tell us what blessedness looks like? Not all of us can build Habitat houses and certainly not every day, but every single one of us can dedicate our lives to the service of others in Christ's name. Will you?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Christian who knew more than most what it meant to be persecuted for righteousness sake. He was a German pastor, jailed and finally executed for opposing Hitler. Bonhoeffer said that all the Beatitudes point back to Jesus, that their purpose is to invite us to trust Jesus and to follow him with our whole hearts even when it costs us some or all of the flimsy things we call blessings.

So, Bonhoeffer asks, where can we find a community of faith that is blessed in the way Jesus describes? Where can we look for support for our commitment to justice, mercy, and humility? Then he answers his own question. He says that the blessed community is and was those who follow Christ all the way to his cross:

"It has become clear that there is only one place for [the blessed], namely, the place where the poorest, the most tempted, the meekness of all may be found, at the cross on Golgotha. The faith-community of the blessed is the community of the Crucified. With him they lost everything, and with him they found everything. Now the word comes down from the cross: blessed, blessed."^v

How about now? How about you?

ⁱ "Blessed" Brett James, Hillary Lindsey and Troy Verges, RCA Nashville, 2001

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words*, HarperOne, 2004, 35

ⁱⁱⁱ Alan Jay Lerner, "Seven Deadly Virtues" *Camelot*, 1960

^{iv} Kurt Vonnegut, "Cold Turkey" *In These Times*, May 10, 2004, http://inthesetimes.com/article/cold_turkey

^v Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffer Reader*, Fortress, 2013, 496