

Micah 6:1-8
Matthew 5:1-12

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany, Year A
January 29, 2023
Midway Presbyterian Church

Blessed

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson for this Fourth Sunday after Epiphany the people of Israel are challenged by God with regard to his demands. God is not to be found in burnt offerings, calves, rams, oil, or an eldest child, like the surrounding culture promotes. Rather, God calls for doing justly, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. Listen to these words from Micah 6:1-8...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson we find the opening of The Sermon on the Mount—what we know as the Beatitudes. It's been called a profile of life in the kingdom of God. There are surprises with regard to those who Jesus designates as blessed. Listen to these words from Matthew 5:1-12...

Sermon

“Have a blessed day!” We’ve all heard that phrase at the end of a phone conversation or upon parting from a friend. Or we’ve seen it at the end of an email. A blessed day is something that all of us desire, but may be different for each individual. What is it that makes people feel blessed today?

For some a blessed day is having the stock market go up rather than down. For a teenager it may mean finally getting a date with that someone special...or not being grounded even though your grades are awful. For others it may mean being healthy for a change...getting a raise at work... having your children remember you on your birthday...or the preacher having a short sermon.

But listen to this:

Blessed are the poor in spirit...

Blessed are those who mourn...

Blessed are the meek...

If there is any part of the Gospel that takes today's values and turns them upside down, it is the Beatitudes.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain.

Mountain hints at loftiness of teaching. Moses had gone up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten commandments. On a high mountain, Jesus was Transfigured before Peter, James, and John. After The Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives and Jesus told of betrayal. On that hill called Golgotha Jesus was crucified. And Matthew closes his gospel with Jesus and the remaining eleven disciples on a Mountain, Jesus giving the Great Commission:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...

And remember, I am with you always... (Matthew 28:19a, 20b)

So here in Chapter 5, this first of five major sections of our Lord's teaching provided by Matthew, Jesus goes up a mountain,

"And he sat down."

When a Jewish rabbi wanted to give official teaching, he sat down. What Jesus was about to say was central to all his teaching.

"Then he began to speak." (NRSV)

The King James Version says "And he opened his mouth," indicating that what he spoke was a solemn utterance of central things, an opening of Jesus' heart and mind to those who would truly be his disciples.

But what he taught was different, challenging, and disrupting—yet potentially comforting and encouraging. Jesus had observed the type of righteousness called righteous in his day, and now took issue with it.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20)

The Beatitudes, far from being passive or mild, are a gauntlet flung down before both the world's and religion's accepted standards. The Sermon on the Mount is about the “greater righteousness” that is to characterize the life of Jesus' disciples and the Christian community.

In his commentary on Matthew, Dale Bruner states:

One wonders at first why Jesus left when he saw big crowds. Or to put the question in another way, why does Jesus cease a successful healing ministry to undertake a teaching one? It is the question in our time of why interrupt action with talk?

Bruner believes that Jesus wants to practice preventive medicine, not only curative. Jesus wishes to do public health work and not just surgery. In life as in Scripture, words and deeds often have a cause-and-effect relationship. Good words can put us back together again; they can integrate, help, and heal. Wrong words can hurt us and make us sick. So Jesus wants to incorporate disciples into his ministry of preventive medicine. When they believe and obey this sermon, they become like antibodies in a sick world.

In William J. Bausch's sermon, *Seeing as Saints*, he tells the story of the time he worked at a mental hospital where he met a delusional patient named Irma. Irma believed she was the daughter of an African princess and a black tiger, even though she was white. Bausch thought he might be able to persuade her of her irrationality, but to no avail. Her inner world had an amazing consistency, only her *starting point* was bizarre. A psychiatrist explained that mental illness lies in the starting point, in the seeing, and not in the logic.

As Christians we have a different starting point than the world, one which might make us seem odd or ignorant. Origen of Alexandria remarked that holiness is seeing with the eyes of Christ. The eyes of Christ see that the truly blessed are the ones who are mourning for our broken world, hungering for righteousness, the meek. This is a logic the world can hardly imagine.

The Sermon on the Mount echoes the prophet Micah's words about doing justly, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. (Micah 6:8b) God does not require burnt offerings and great sacrifices. Rather justice, kindness, and humility before God.

And who are those who know Jesus' blessing? Well, they are those who

“are poor in spirit”

—that is, disciples who stand before God with no illusions of self-righteousness or self-sufficiency.

“those who mourn”

—that is, disciples who grieve over sin and evil in the world.

“the meek”

—that is, disciples who are lowly and powerless, whose only hope is God.

“those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”

—that is, disciples who yearn for the final salvation that only God can bring.

“the merciful”

—that is, disciples who set aside judgment and forgive.

“the pure in heart”

—that is disciples who are undivided in their allegiance to God.

“the peacemakers”

—that is, disciples who work for the wholeness and well-being that God wills for a broken world.

“those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake”

—that is, disciples who suffer because they serve God.

Upon all these, Jesus pronounces his blessing. And what is his blessing? It is a peace beyond understanding. It is “glorifying God and enjoying him forever.” We find this “blessing” often in the Old Testament. In the first verse of the first Psalm:

Blessed are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
 or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
 but their delight is in the law of the Lord. (Psalm 1:1-2a)

I’m reminded of that old hymn, originally a poem, originally written by Rhea Miller in 1922 and set to music and sung by George Beverly Shea:

I’d rather have Jesus than silver or gold;
 I’d rather be His than have riches untold;
 I’d rather have Jesus than houses or lands.
 I’d rather be led by His nail-pierced hand.

“Blessed.” The Greek word for blessed which is used in the beatitudes is *makarios*. William Barclay says that *makarios* is a word used especially to describe the gods. And that in Christianity there is a divine, god-like joy. The Greeks called the Island of Cyprus, *He Makaria*, The Happy Isle, and they did so because they believed that Cyprus was so lovely, so rich, and so fertile that a person would never need to go beyond its shores to find the perfectly happy life. Cyprus had such a climate, such flowers and fruits and trees, such minerals, and such natural resources that it contained within itself all the materials for happiness. Makarios – blessed—then describes that joy which has its secret within itself, that joy which is independent of the chances and changes of life. In our English word *happiness* we find the root word *hap* which means chance. Human happiness is dependent upon the chances and changes of life. The Christian blessing is a peace that as Jesus said, “no one can take from you.” It is *that* joy of which the Beatitudes speak.

It seems the news that makes it to the top in the papers and on the radio, TV, and internet is more often than not, bad news. “Children and teacher shot at school.” “Video released of police brutality.” “Plane crashes killing all aboard.” Journalists turn up in great numbers when things go wrong, and there are plenty of things that go wrong today.

But there was a lot of bad news in Jesus’ day also. Immoral kings, crooked tax-collectors, people caught in adultery. John the Baptist imprisoned. Housewives losing their coins. Shepherds losing their sheep. Fathers losing their sons. Children dying. The occupying forces murdering people in the temple. The priests hypocrites. The disciples without understanding. Judas betraying. Peter denying. Jesus crucified.

It’s striking then how Matthew presents Jesus’ opening words from that mountain. Not, “Let me tell you how bad everything is.” But, “Let me tell you the joy of peacemakers, merciful people, seekers of justice, workers for wholeness.”

My friends, the good news of the Lord’s realm is not only something we have to wait for, but a present reality we can know today. Through the Beatitudes, Jesus offers an alternative way of viewing the world and ourselves. Day by day his blessings can change us, and therefore the world around us.

May he who has ears to hear, hear this good news from the mountain. Amen.