

Applause!

February 2, 2020

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Matthew 5:

- [1] Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him.
- [2] And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:
- [3] "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- [4] "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
- [5] "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
- [6] "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
- [7] "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
- [8] "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
- [9] "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
- [10] "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- [11] "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
- [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you."

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An old missionary couple who had worked in Africa for many years was returning to New York City to retire. With no pension and in poor health, they were discouraged and fearful for the future. They happened to be booked on the same ship as Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from a big-game hunting expedition. They watched as the passengers and crew fussed over him - all the fanfare accompanying the President's entourage.

But no one noticed them. The missionary said to his wife, "Something is wrong. Why should we have given our lives in faithful service for God in Africa all these years and have no one care a thing about us? Here this man comes back from a hunting trip and everyone makes much over him, but nobody pays the slightest attention to us."

At the dock in New York City a band was waiting to greet the President. The mayor and other dignitaries were present. Reporters were on hand to write about the event. But the missionary couple slipped off the ship unnoticed.

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That night, in a cheap flat they found on the East Side, the man's spirit broke. He said to his wife, "I can't take this. God isn't treating us fairly." His wife suggested he go into the bedroom and tell the Lord. A short time later he came out of the bedroom with a face completely changed. His wife asked, "What happened?" "The Lord settled it with me," he said. "I told him how bitter I was that the President should receive this tremendous homecoming, but no one met us as we returned home. And when I finished, it seemed as though the Lord put his hand on my shoulder and simply said, "But you're not home yet!"¹

Blessed are those who are at odds with the world... They are on the right road. They are on their way home. And great [is] their reward: the applause of heaven.²

I wish you could have known my wife Elsie's mother. Her name also was Elsie. She was a wonderful woman whose earthly life ended in 1974 with lymphocytic lymph sarcoma. She was born in 1910 on the Heinsen ancestral farm just outside Oak Harbor, Ohio - the farm going back to the late 1850's when the Heinsens emigrated from Maasbull, Schleswig-Holstein in Northwest Germany.

Josephine Elsie Heinsen grew up in the Lutheran church. She learned in German by memory all the things Lutherans are supposed to learn by memory by the time they are confirmed, including the Gospel called The Beatitudes.

In 1934 Josephine Elsie Heinsen went to the World's Fair in Chicago. While there she saw a replica of the Gutenberg Press. It was printing out pages to show people what it could produce when it printed. She got one of the pages. The page was The Beatitudes. She kept it. And kept it. Until she got a son-in-law who was in seminary in Chicago. Then, in 1973 before I graduated from seminary, she came to Chicago to visit. While there she took the train one day to the Loop to The Cuneo Press. She took with her the page of The Beatitudes, which needed restoration and preserving. She left the page with them and had it shipped to her upon completion. She gave it to me for a birthday present in January of 1974 when I was serving in my first parish. It is one of my prized possessions and hangs behind my study desk at home. I have it displayed on the easel for you to see up close if you choose.

Jesus Our Lord gave us The Beatitudes in a teaching known from Matthew's Gospel as The Sermon on The Mount or from Luke's Gospel as The Sermon on The Plain.

The word Beatitude means blessed or bless-ed. It is the descriptive word Jesus uses for people who are following God's operating instructions.³ For people who are living as God calls us to live. He is not

¹ Donald W. McCullough, *Finding Happiness in the Most Unlikely Places* (InterVarsity, 1990), p. 145.

² *Walking the Right Road*, Bob Sanders, http://www.lakegrovepres.org/sermons/S2003/sermon_2003-11-02.htm

³ *Eavesdropping* by Barbara Lemmel in *Christian Century*, January 20, 1999. <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=602>

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prescribing a formula to follow to be a Christian. He is describing people who already exist at the very time he gives the teaching.

There are 9 beatitudes in Matthew and 4 in Luke. Jesus gave them in different ways at different times for different purposes depending on the needs of his hearers. The ones we are most familiar with are these from Matthew. All of The Beatitudes are inter-related and make up the one kingdom of heaven ball of grace.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, "Most of us do not know what to do with the Beatitudes. Some of us have heard them for so long that they have lost their shock value for us. They just sound sort of sweet and familiar to us - a Christian poem - something to needle-point and hang over the piano. Others of us hear them like new commandments and worry that we are not meek enough, pure enough, persecuted enough. But please note that there are no 'shoulds' or 'oughts' here, no 'shalts' or 'shalt nots.' The language of the Beatitudes is not transactional language - do this and you will receive this; do that and you will receive that. It is descriptive language - this is who these people are now, and this is what the future holds for them. It is not the language of law but of gospel, the language of hope and promise that the way things are now is not the way they will always be, and that those who find themselves at the back of the bus now will be sitting in first class before the trip is through."⁴

I wish we had time to have a dialogue. I would ask, "How do you understand the Beatitudes? What does each one mean to you? How do you understand them taken as a whole?" Maybe we can do that sometime in a Bible study or in private conversation. In the meantime, you came this morning for hearing the Gospel at this moment in time. And it is the Gospel you shall hear just as Jesus' hearers on the mountain side heard it that day.

There is an old man down in Kentucky whose name is Fred Craddock. He is an old country preacher and teacher who came out to Kansas City once where I heard him expound. Listen to how he hears the Good News in the Beatitudes:

"Very important ...is the recognition that the beatitudes appear at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, before a single instruction is given, before there has been time for obedience or disobedience. If the blessings were only for the deserving, very likely they would be stated at the end of the sermon, probably prefaced with the conditional clause - if you have done all these things. But appearing at the beginning, they say that God's favor precedes all our endeavors. In fact, all our efforts at kingdom living are in response to divine grace, motivated by 'because of,' not 'in order to.' In this regard, the Sermon on the Mount begins as the [Ten Commandments] begin, with a statement of God's gracious initiative: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of bondage" (Exod. 20:2) . Some Christian characterizations of Judaism forget the words of grace in the Old Testament. In

⁴ ABlessed Are The Upside Down@ in Gospel Medicine by Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MASS., 1995, p. 147.

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fact, some Christians are so anxious to rush to the Sermon on the Mount's moral and ethical instructions that they overlook the initial word that God's blessing is the context for all our behavior and relationships."

"Finally, and most important ...God's favor is granted to those whom society regards as the ones left behind: the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the merciful, those hungering for justice, the pure hearted, the makers of peace, those mistreated for the cause of justice. On these Jesus pronounces God's congratulations, with these God identifies in Jesus, to these comes the Good News of God's interceding grace. What a reversal of values and fortunes! Many of these are victims, to be sure, but the beatitudes deliver them from a victim mentality. Just as there is a difference between being a servant and being servile, so there is a difference between being victimized and regarding oneself as a victim. Those who in the face of violence, oppression, abuse and neglect continue to turn the other cheek, go the second mile and share possessions even with accusers are not really victims. They are in a very real and profound sense victors, set free to live by hearing Jesus extend to them the beatitude [blessing] of God."⁵

You and I came once again to church this morning to hear God's blessing. Didn't we? Among us are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, those who work for peace, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, those reviled, those who are being lied about because of following Jesus - you are all here at the foot of the San Gabriel mountains. And Jesus is here telling you - you are indeed blessed.

The poor in spirit know theirs and the worlds only riches are in God. And their spirits long for everyone to recognize that. The Kingdom of Heaven and all its riches are yours. You are here and you are blessed.

Those who mourn that things and people and churches and governments are not the way God wants them to be and who work and pray for his Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. You will be comforted. God's Kingdom is coming. Don't ever doubt it! You and your departed loved ones will be reunited. You are here and you are blessed.

Those of you who are averse to self-seeking is a better translation than "meek." A colloquial translation is: "Blessed are those who are not bent on feathering their own nest, for God will feather it for them."⁶ The earth itself is yours! You are here and you are blessed.

Those of you who have a ravenous appetite for God's justice to be done on earth - especially for people to live in right relationships with one another - it will occur. You will be able to eat to your fill. You

5 Hearing God=s Blessing by Fred Craddock in The Christian Century, Jan. 24, 1990

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=707>

6 <http://www.lectionary.org/matthew/02-02-03,%20Epiphany%204A,%20Matt%205.1-12.htm>

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are here and you are blessed.

Those of you who go about helping people simply because they need help and who have no time for judging people - God will do the same to you. God's mercy will bathe you! You are here and you are blessed.

Those of you whose hearts have surrendered completely to God and who have no ulterior motives or hidden agendas - you will get to look straight into the face of God. You are here and you are blessed.

Those of you who work for peace - for God's wholeness to consume the earth and everyone on it - God is one who conceived you! You are God's son. You are God's daughter. You are here and you are blessed.

Those of you who do and say what God would have you do and say and get into trouble because of it. The misunderstood, the judged, those treated unfairly and unjustly and poorly. And spoken ill of. The object of rumors and gossip. Jump for joy! God is waiting on you at the gates of heaven! And so are all the prophets! You are here and you are blessed.

This is God's Good News! God is applauding you! It is appropriate, I suggest, that you should now stand and give up to God a thunderous round of applause!

Amen.

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