

Blessed

Matthew 5:1-16

February 26, 2023

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

David Lewicki, preaching

As Lent begins we also begin our exploration of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. So far in his gospel, Matthew has shown us the remarkable circumstances of Jesus' birth and his parents' precarious escape from the wrath of Herod. We have seen Jesus baptized and have witnessed the Holy Spirit's presence with him, both in that baptism and in his confrontation with the Tempter. We have seen Jesus flee to the north, to Galilee, where his message about a new empire that is here, now, resonates with those who are sick and tired of the existing one. Jesus is healing people with his hands. People are drawn from all over to see him. Something is happening in and through this man. Now, he is set to explain what this "new empire" is all about. Like Moses, who went up a mountain to receive the law from God, Jesus goes up a mountain. He sits to teach, as a rabbi would.

...his disciples came to him. ² And he began to speak 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 will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

These words are so beguiling.

They are not a strategy for living. They are not a "little instruction book for life." They are not practical. They are anathema to our culture of listicles: "improve your life in 5 simple steps."

The power of these words *is* their impracticality. Jesus announces to his disciples and to everyone who has ever lived that God's kingdom is absurd. Blessed are you when you are lost. Blessed are you when you are at your wit's end. Blessed are you when you have nothing to pay the bills. Blessed are you when the love of your life dies before you do.

Blessed are you when you long for a just world that does not exist and doesn't look like it ever will. Blessed are you when you release others from the harm they cause you. Blessed are you when you see the best in everyone. Blessed are you when you see the humanity of your enemy. Blessed are you when the world looks at you doing all of these foolish things and calls you naïve and a chump and tells you, "only suckers believe that crap."

Jesus lays it all out here for us.

The kingdom of heaven, God's kingdom, God's realm, the Beloved Community of God—is not like the world you know. It is a *paradoxical* world. A paradox is something that appears to contradict itself. The paradox in these beatitudes is that God is supposed to be powerful and good and strong. The Creator of all that is. So if that great God is blessing something, marking that thing as holy, shouldn't that come with good fortune? Shouldn't God's blessing be a force-field of protection? Shouldn't our status as being "blessed" by a powerful God be evident in the quality of our life? In our wealth? Our power? Our care-free life? #blessed!

The Beatitudes mark the decisive moment when Jesus establishes the beguiling quality of his life and of God's reign. The God who is Lord of all Creation does bless people; this God is especially present to people. When you hear "blessed" you should hear "God is especially with you when...." "God is with you when you are poor. God is with you when you are weak and at the end of your rope. God is with you when you're in the pit of grief. God is with those of us who are losers and lost and left-out.

Remember, Jesus is talking to people on the "business" end of the Roman empire. We've seen already in Matthew, from the way people flock to John the Baptist and to Jesus' call to discipleship, that people are hungry for a way of life that makes sense, a way of life that reverses the oppressive power of the empire, a way of life that is humane, a way of life that invests *every human being with dignity and worth*. Empires and unjust economies value people differently, based on their proximity to power and wealth. Jesus calls out this lie and says, "God values the people farthest away from power and wealth.

There can be no doubt that Jesus is drawing lines. Call it a "preferential option for the poor." Howard Thurman called it Jesus' affection for the "dis-inherited." Jesus is saying to those of us who struggle are God's favorites. God is with you. And if your soul aches at the persistence of injustice and if the machinery of war-making makes you sick, and if you want a different world, where love reigns and all are honored and all are fed, God is with you.

The problem, of course you see the problem—the problem is that the world that Jesus describes—in which the meek inherit the earth and the poor and the persecuted are rewarded—this world... doesn't seem to exist. Jesus says as much. Your reward is "in heaven." It's "in heaven."

That's where we come to with this text. None of these lovely, paradoxical things Jesus describes feel like they're fully true. Not in a way that we can hold, touch.

So... what are these beatitudes? Are they just a con? Are they just way to butter up and sweet talk already vulnerable folks—to bait them with a promise of future reward? Some say that's been the Christian con-game all along. Come, bring your treasure to us now, and surely... God will reward you in the by-and-by.

I don't blame people for being cynical about this aspect of Christianity. Christianity has been as corrupt and exploitative as any institution the world has ever seen, trading on the promises of Jesus... "one day... some day... you will see it all when you get to heaven."

But here's the thing. Jesus doesn't say that we have to wait until we go to heaven to see this world, this kingdom. He says the opposite. Remember his first declaration—the words he borrowed from his friend, John? "The kingdom of heaven has come near." We have totally corrupted the Scriptures when we say that heaven is a place we go to. No. Heaven is God's future and it comes near to us. Heaven comes to us, so close, so near that we can see it, we can smell and taste and touch it.

- When those of us who are poor have their needs fully met
- When those of us who grieve are held in the arms of another and our tears are wiped away
- When the mighty are pulled down from their positions, and when politics and economics values every citizen equally
- When forgiveness and restoration and reparation are chosen and revenge is abandoned
- When peace and justice are so evident in your imagination that you can taste them on your lips...

That's heaven. That's the future. And it's coming. And so Jesus is asking you, right now, to live your life expecting that future. Live as though poor folk are the most important folk you will meet—like meeting God. Live though grief can yield the deepest peace. Live as though every conflict has a peaceful solution.

When you live this way you will look like a fool. And people will make fun of you. And they may hurt you because they are invested in the lie of the world that is.

But when you live "as though," when we live "as though," we will be the salt that preserves the world and makes it taste good. We will be the light by which the world sees the truth.