

"BLESSED"
Matthew 5:1-12
February 2, 2020
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Somewhere along the way I started signing most of my letters, cards, and emails with the word, "Blessings." I don't know when I started doing that. And I don't really know what caused me to start using that word but it is a rich and meaningful word, a word that wishes all good things to whomever I am writing. It is a word that, for me, captures the essence of the hopes I have for others. I don't know what blessings you may need or want, so I just offer the word for you to receive.

The word "blessing" has the fragrance of grace- the promise of a treasure unearned, a gift undeserved, something you maybe didn't ask for and didn't even know you needed. "Blessing" seems to be the gem around which the Christian faith is built. Near the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Matthew's Gospel we find a whole list of them.

Today we start a brief journey into what is known as the "Sermon on the Mount," a collection of the teachings of Jesus gathered from a variety of different situations and different times in his ministry. Last week we heard Jesus call his first four disciples and then start teaching, preaching, and healing all over the place.

At the beginning of chapter five, he walks up the mountain- always a place of revelation in scripture- and he sits down- the position of a teacher. This is his inaugural address in which he describes in detail what life in God's Empire is going to look like. Matthew wrote for his congregation of Jewish Christians who were trying to figure out how to incorporate their Jewish heritage with their new Christian faith. Matthew was trying to help them understand how to be faithful to Jesus Christ in a changing world under difficult circumstances. Preacher Tom Long calls Matthew's Gospel, *"A first aid manual for this church in the midst of a struggle."*

Matthew gives them guidance as they build their Christian character on the foundation of their Jewish faith and heritage. "The Sermon on the Mount," a sort of preamble to Matthew's story of Jesus, shows how radical and life-transforming Christian faith is supposed to be. For Matthew, faith is a fusion of gospel and ethics; faith and morality; attitudes and actions. He called the people to practice what Jesus preached because that is what Jesus did.

We cannot sufficiently interpret the Sermon on the Mount in isolation from all that comes before and after it. We have to know who Jesus is before we can decide if it makes sense; before we decide if we are going to answer his call. This chunk of scripture contains some

of Jesus' most difficult teachings: "turn the other cheek, love your enemies, curb your anger." He talks about adultery, divorce, giving offerings, worrying, and praying - all in just three chapters. It is a lot to take in and it is even more difficult if we have no idea who he is.

Professor Stanley Saunders writes, *"Unlike the commandments Moses received, Jesus' sermon is not so much a rule book as a series of images and case studies that describe the nature of God's reign. Jesus, the poet laureate of God's empire, imparts impressions and images that point the way for those who seek God's will and ways in the world."* (1)

The Sermon on the Mount is not a theological lesson, it is a call for decision and action. It does not impose a set of rules but rather seeks to instill a moral vision and compass. If you have read any part of it you know that these teachings are not based on common sense, there is nothing sensible about most of them. In fact, some parts of these teachings seem quite ridiculous, at least from a human perspective. And that is the point. These teachings of Jesus are counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, radical, subversive. Just like Jesus himself. These teaching are not concerned with what is practical or possible but a call to a higher level of understanding and action and in doing so they turn the values of the world- in that time the Roman Empire- upside down. They disorient us because they are rooted in a radically different perception of the world. They take us into a different world, with different assumptions, values, and practices. They take us into God's world.

Matthew helps us to see that we can believe these impossible things because of what we know about Jesus and the God who sent him. And one of the things we know is that our God blesses us and asks us to be a blessing to others.

When I was a kid one of my Sunday School teachers told us that the best way to think of the Beatitudes is to consider them "be- attitudes." They are ways of thinking that turn into ways of being. They are so familiar to many of us- so hear them again in a different voice- from The Message by Eugene Peterson.

"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.

"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. God's food and drink is the best meal you'll ever eat.

"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.

"You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

"Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble."

In her book, *BLESSINGS*, Christin Lore Weber writes, " *Each beatitude is an act of faith in the radical potential of our world to be made whole. Each is a paradox of seemingly irreconcilable opposites. They are not laws to be obeyed, but blessings to be contemplated and incarnated.*"

These nine blessings speak the language of grace. Tom Long writes, "*They proclaim what is, in the light of the (reign) of heaven, unassailably true. They describe the purpose of every holy law, the foundation of every custom, the aim of every practice of this new society, this colony of the (empire) of God, the church called and instructed by Jesus.*" (1)

And of course, like almost everything Jesus told us, the truth the Beatitudes proclaim is pretty much the opposite of the truth the world proclaims. In our experience those who mourn aren't always comforted. Those who are merciful often get taken advantage of. Peacemakers sometimes end up in prison. The poor in spirit don't even make minimum wage. These are not entrance requirements for life in God's family and they are not situations we should hope to one day experience to prove how faithful we are. Jesus is addressing those who were- right then- in that moment dealing with difficult and painful realities.

He said, "*Blessed are you, who are poor in spirit, right now, at this very moment.*" And then he makes a promise, "*For yours is the kingdom of heaven. Not after you die. Not in two hundred years IF certain things happen in a certain way- but right now, in this*

moment. God is with you no matter what happens. You are blessed right now and you are never alone.

That may not seem like much consolation for those who are in trouble but for Matthew's audience it made a world of difference. They heard these blessings as words of encouragement, hope, and reassurance. Matthew promises them that, unlike the Roman Empire, God is a God who cares about the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers, those who suffer. These blessings also give them an idea of the kind of people they are called to be.

Theologian N.T. Wright says the Beatitudes are "*wonderful news*," they are "*part of Jesus' invitation, part of his summons, part of his way of saying that God is at work in a fresh way and that this is what it looks like. Jesus is beginning a new era for God's people and God's world.*" From here on everything they thought they knew about how the world works is transformed. And they are blessed because of it.

In some ways the Beatitudes and the entire Sermon on the Mount call us to practice living as we will when God's heaven comes to earth one day. They call us to live now as if the promises of God are true. They call us to live as the people we believe God has created us to be right here and right now.

In his book, *TO BLESS THE SPACE BETWEEN US*, the late John O'Donohue encourages us to bless each other. He wrote, "*It would be lovely if we could rediscover our power to bless one another. I believe each of us can bless. When a blessing is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. Some of the plenitude flows into our hearts from the invisible neighbor-hood of loving kindness. In the light and reverence of blessing, a person or situation becomes illuminated in a completely new way. In a dead wall a new window opens. In dense darkness a path starts to glimmer. And into a broken heart healing falls like morning dew. It is ironic that so often we continue to live like paupers though our inheritance of spirit is so vast.*"

He describes a blessing as "*a circle of light drawn around a person to protect, heal and strengthen.*" He believes that "*a blessing awakens future wholeness.*" He wrote, "*The human heart continues to dream of a state of wholeness, a place where everything comes together, where loss will be made good, where blindness will transform into vision, where damage will be made whole, where the clenched question will open in the house of surprise where the travails of life's journey will enjoy a homecoming. To invoke a blessing is to call some of that wholeness upon a person now.*"

To offer a blessing is an act of grace.

It is a prayer.

It is a gift from God.

May we be so blessed.

Amen.

End Notes:

- *PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW*, Stanley Saunders, Westminster John Knox Press. P. 30.
- *MATTHEW*, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox Press. 1997. P. 47.