

"BLESSED ARE..."

Matthew 5:1-12

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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Are you feeling blessed? If so, you might go online to social media and be among the millions who post photos with the #Blessed. A quick search on Instagram showed me that there are 129 million photos posted under #blessed and another 1.9 million with #blessed life. I scrolled through some of the photos and found that most are of: young women posing (and pouting) for selfies, wedding photos, announcements of new babies, and new homes. There were a few photos of luxury cars. This simple search leads me to believe that people are blessed because they are beautiful, in the perfect relationship, or rich. Some of those who posted

added that they have these things because they are blessed by God.

I find it difficult to reconcile this understanding of "blessed" with the understanding Jesus preached in his Sermon on the Mount.

Near the beginning of Matthew's Gospel- after Jesus has been born, baptized, and called his first disciples- Matthew places him on a mountain where he sits down and teaches his disciples and the crowd that has followed him. Matthew uses this extended sermon- which stretches for three chapters- to establish Jesus' identity and purpose. It is his inaugural address where he makes it pretty clear that the ways of God are **not** the ways of human beings. Through this teaching he defines the essence of his ministry and gives a glimpse into the world as God intends it to be. Anyone paying close attention would hear quite clearly what kind of Messiah he was going to be. And he would spend the rest of his ministry reminding them.

He starts right off with what we call "The Beatitudes." Tom Long defines them this way. *"The Beatitudes 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 in this new society, this colony of the kingdom, the church called and instructed by Jesus. It becomes quickly apparent that the Beatitudes turn our world's values upside down.

What is true for those who live in the power of the (reign) of heaven is a flat reversal of what is considered to be true in the culture at large. Jesus speaks nine beatitudes in all, and taken together, they describe the traits of the citizenry of the (reign) of heaven." (1)

We notice pretty quickly that Jesus offers blessings not to the perfect, the poised, and the popular but to those who are ragged, broken, and torn. For Jesus, the blessed look like this: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted, bullied, and trolled.

This certainly caught the attention of his listeners- don't you think? They lived in a world not unlike our own where the richest one percent took what they wanted, where might made right, and the poor were trampled underfoot. They were ruled by the violent and powerful Roman Empire and were well acquainted with inequality, persecution, brutality, and oppression.

"The Beatitudes are a reminder that the world as we have generally encountered it is not at all the world that God intends or desires for us. Indeed, in many ways God's desired world is an inversion of the world we expect and feel comfortable with and entitled to- particularly those of us who benefit from privilege. With these strange and unexpected blessings, Jesus of Nazareth begins his epic Sermon on the Mount, throughout which he offers instruction, parables, promise, and commands to his followers about the ways that God intends for us to live and the world God calls us to work toward. It's significant that Jesus begins here, with these inverted blessings." (2)

Tom Long reminds us that *"The church of Jesus Christ sees its life in two frames of reference. First, it sees what everyone else sees, too- the world of human history, a world of struggle in which the church works and serves and lives out its mission. Based on the evidence from this world alone, there is little reason for hope or joy. War follows upon war, might makes right, and the innocent suffer every day.*

But the church also possesses a second frame of reference. It sees what others do not see, that God is at work in this world even today and will surely bring all creation to a time of peace and rejoicing, This hoped-for time is the (reign) of heaven. For the faithful the reign is a present reality, giving strength and encouragement to its work." (3)

One of the hardest things to comprehend, as a Christian, is that we are people of the now and the not yet. The world we believe God is calling us to is already in our midst but we can't quite see it yet. And sometimes we can't believe it either.

The Beatitudes show us how the future of God challenges and transforms the present. Everything Jesus says in this sermon contradicts the conventional wisdom of his day and ours. Jesus doesn't present the Beatitudes as moral injunctions. He just states them as simple facts. "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted."

The whole of Jesus' ministry is to proclaim that the world God created and loves is not quite the way it should be. Somehow, over the centuries and generations, people have forgotten who and whose they are. Jesus' job is to remind them and to call them back to a true and pure relationship with God and with each other.

The Beatitudes show what God's world really looks like. It is a word of encouragement and reassurance to those who suffer- reminding them that they are blessed by God and it renews their hope for the future.

In her book, *BLESSINGS*, Christin Lore Weber, writes, "*The way of blessing by which opposites are reconciled and the world is expanded is articulated in the Beatitudes. Each one is an act of faith in the radical potential of our world to be made whole.*" (4)

She says that each beatitude is a paradox of seemingly irreconcilable opposites. (The meek will inherit the earth? I don't think so.) Their purpose is to bear fruit in the lives of the faithful. It is up to us to make them come true- to make each one a reality in **this** world.

The Beatitudes show us God's priorities. You know as well as I do, that God's priorities are not the same as the priorities of our society. If they were, far fewer people would now be dead due to the Covid pandemic. The Beatitudes stand as a daring act of protest against the current order of the world. The reign of God Jesus proclaimed is a new way of seeing and being.

I have to admit that there are times- like now- that I find it hard to believe that this way of living and being will ever come to pass. When I feel this way, I turn to the writings of people who have walked this road ahead of us; people who have stared down evil and oppression and found God's way forward.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu lived through the worst years of apartheid in South Africa. He said that during the darkest days he would say to the president, P.W. Botha, "*We have already won this struggle. You are welcome to come and join the winning side.*"

He writes, "*All the 'objective' facts were against us- the pass laws, the imprisonments, the teargassing, the massacres, the murders- but my confidence was not in the present circumstances but in the laws of God's universe. This is a moral universe, which means that, despite all the evidence that seems to be to the contrary, there is no way that evil and injustice and oppression and lies can have the last word. God is a God who cares about right and wrong. God cares about justice and injustice. God is in charge. That is what upheld the morale of our people, to know that in the end good will prevail. It was these higher laws that convinced me that our peaceful struggle would topple the immoral laws of apartheid.*"

And then he adds- and this is why I respect him so much- *"Of course, there were times when you had to whistle in the dark to keep your morale up, and you wanted to whisper in God's ear: 'God, we know You are in charge, but can't You make it a little more obvious.'" (5)*

It was a long and deadly struggle, but change did come to South Africa. The Archbishop voted for the first time in his life when he was sixty-two years old.

The late Congressman, John Lewis, was born into a family of sharecroppers who had been working in the cotton, corn, and peanut fields for generations in rural Alabama. He wrote, *"Sharecropping took many forms in different states, but mainly it was a system designed to make us fail. Our work was undervalued, our debt inflated, making it almost impossible to get ahead. We were never paid a living wage, so we had to carry punishing debt to buy the necessary tools and supplies we needed in order to farm. To me, it was a vicious cycle I plainly perceived, even as a young boy, was intended to keep us in poverty. From my earliest memories, I was fundamentally disturbed by the unbridled meanness of the world around me. Though I was not yet familiar with the words of the Declaration of Independence, I could feel in my bones that segregation was wrong, and I felt I had an obligation to change it." (6)*

John Lewis, from an early age, before he even knew just how the world worked, heard the whispers of the spirit calling him to wrestle with the soul of this nation. He could see a higher vision of what this nation could be. He knew that God called us to be more than we were. He knew that God had created the world for justice and peace. And he spent his life making God's reign a reality for many.

His faith is what kept him on the right path. He wrote, *"Faith, to me, is knowing in the solid core of your soul that the work is already done, even as an idea is being conceived in your mind. Faith is being so sure of what the spirit has whispered in your heart that your belief in its eventuality is unshakable. Nothing can make you doubt that what you have heard will become a reality. Even if you do not live to see it come to pass, you know without a doubt that it will be." (7)*

In the Beatitudes Jesus announced this new world of God and he embodied it throughout his life and ministry. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Congressman John Lewis literally put their lives on the line to embody God's reign. They knew that God was at work in a fresh new way in this old world and they did what they could to make it a reality. They lived as though the promises of God were true and in doing so, they made them true. And that is what we are called to do as well. In this place and in this time.

We have an election coming up on Tuesday. I know that many of you have already voted. I also know that many of us are worried about the direction of our nation and the outcome of this election. There is a great deal of pain, fear, anger, and division on the loose in our

country. I believe the very soul of our nation is at stake in this election. And I know that many of us are feeling hopeless and helpless.

I call us to take the words of the Beatitudes to heart. We have the power to transform our own little corner of this world. No matter what happens on Tuesday or in the weeks and years ahead we are called to be people of the promise; faithful people who believe the words of Jesus.

Our world has been turned upside down by a pandemic, by ongoing racial inequality and oppression, by political corruption, and by economic uncertainty. This upending has meant immense suffering and struggle. But while we have been shaken up, while we are in this space of upheaval, perhaps we can see our reality from a different vantage point.

Perhaps we might lean into the discomfort by asking ourselves why we were so comfortable with the world as it was before. Why was that world in so many ways the opposite of the world Jesus illustrates in the Beatitudes?

Maybe we should ask ourselves if this world was ever right side up in God's eyes? If this is the end of our old world, what new and better world might we allow to begin? In the wise words of Valerie Kaur, "*What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb- what if it is the darkness of the womb?*" My brothers and sisters, if it is the darkness of the life-giving womb, how might we serve as midwives in the birthing of God's blessed new world? Amen.

End Notes:

- *MATTHEW*, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox Press. 1997. pp. 46-47.
- "*LIVING BY THE WORD*, by Layton E. Williams. *THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY*. October 21, 2020. P. 22.
- Long, pp. 47-48
- *BLESSINGS: A WOMANCHRIST REFLECTION ON THE BEATTITUDES*, Christin Lore Weber. Harper and Row. 1989. P. 2
- *GOD HAS A DREAM: A VISION OF HOPE FOR OUR TIME*, Desmond Tutu. Image Books. 2004. P. 2.
- *ACROSS THAT BRIDGE: LIFE LESSONS AND A VISION FOR CH*