

“Blessed Who?”
Delivered Sunday, January 30, 2011
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Matthew 5:1-12

This beloved passage of scripture takes us onto holy ground. As with the first chapter of Genesis, or Psalm 23, or John 3:16 – any attempt at interpretation of this text runs the risk of robbing its poetic eloquence, and its comforting familiarity. Perhaps the familiarity of these verses itself invites us simply to remember what we already know about them. Jesus went up on the mountain and sat down and began to teach what we have come to call “The Sermon on the Mount.” Just like the mountain of the Great Commission which we ascended last Sunday, again this mountain is not named because location is less important than its symbolism, as an earthly place where God dwells. “I lift up mine eyes to the hills,” the Psalmist says, “from whence cometh my help.” Biblical mountains are places where God comes for moments of special revelation to the human family.

Taking his seat on this mountain, Jesus assumes the posture of a Rabbi, speaking as one with authority. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is the New Moses handing down a new Torah, a new teaching, which will revise and reinterpret the old Law. As on Mount Sinai at the time of Moses, from Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount a new people of God is called into being. The church is being formed, and the Beatitudes are the preamble of a new constitution. (1) Before a single instruction is given, before there has been time for obedience or disobedience to this new way of life, there is blessing. The Beatitudes remind us that God’s favor precedes all our endeavors. In fact, all our efforts at living under the reign of God are in response to God’s grace, not motivated by it. Blessing from God comes first.

And who is blessed? According to Jesus, God’s favor is granted to those whom the world usually 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. This is where our common understanding of blessing parts company with the words of Jesus, because the Beatitudes seem to turn the world’s values upside-down!

When we count our blessings, and name them one by one, we usually think of the gifts of God first – goodness, abundance, food, family and friendship, a good home, good health and a good life. “Have a blessed day,” people might say to you with good cheer in a public place, and what they mean is: “Have a great day, I hope all goes well, perhaps something really fortunate will happen.” It is a nice and cordial thing to say, but it’s not the blessing Jesus is talking about here. Jesus bestows a very different kind of blessing than what we mean by, “have a blessed day,” or the blessing we pray over full plates at supper, or the fullness we feel when all is well.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish religious thinker and philosopher of the last century, once heard the Beatitudes read in worship and went home and asked, “Why did no one laugh?... Was no one listening?” (2) What is blessed about being poor –

whether abject poverty or simply poverty of spirit? What is blessed about mourning, or being meek, especially in a world that believes only the strong survive? What is blessed about being hungry or thirsty, much less hungering or thirsting for righteousness – speaking of a thankless task in our contemporary world? Mercy – if valued at all, it is more an ideal than a practice, and when called for, the merciful person, more often than not, is thought mushy-minded, fuzzy headed, or without nerve. Making peace? Real peace – not a peace one attempts to enforce with a gun, is not only hard, frustrating, and often futile work, but frequently will lead you to being mocked, called overly idealistic, unrealistic, and even unpatriotic. Try being a true peacemaker; you will soon know what being persecuted for righteousness' sake is all about. These are not the blessings most of us are giving thanks for on a regular basis, but according to Jesus – if you find your heart breaking for the sake of God's love for the world, a very special blessing is in store for you. The comfort we find in the Beatitudes is not that Jesus is asking us to become these things – like poor in spirit, or in mourning, or persecuted. Instead, he offers consolation to those who simply find themselves suffering for the sake of love. (3)

As a matter of fact, Matthew casts Jesus not only in the role of the one who says these things, but also as the one who embodies the beatitudes himself: he is the one who is meek, pure, merciful, and persecuted for righteousness sake. And so shall his followers be. His blessing comes to all, who in our faithfulness to his way of life, find ourselves in need of these consolations.

I hope and pray that we who have become this wonderful church family at Shandon – in our faithfulness to Jesus' call – experience inexpressible joy on a regular basis. But I also know that if you pay close attention to the kingdom Jesus proclaims, and you look around at what is going on in the world, you cannot help but find your heart broken from time to time. You cannot serve among the homeless, for example, as so many of you did this past week, and will do again in the coming winter months, without being overwhelmed by the sadness of so many of our neighbors living on the streets. The amazing grace of the gospel is – they, in their poverty, and we, in our compassion, are especially blessed. As Eugene Peterson has put it, “You are blessed when you are at the end of your rope. When there is less of you there is more of God and of God's rule.”

In her book, *Operating Instructions*, Anne Lamott describes an awful afternoon when she misplaced her aging father. His brain cancer had progressed to the point where he was functioning much like an eager-to-please three-year-old. She had taken him along with her one day to run some errands. Just before she ran into the local bank, she gave him a candy bar and strapped him into the passenger seat of her car. “Of course there was a huge line,” Lamott recalls, “so every so often I'd run to the back of the bank and look through the window to make sure he was still there... Then, the last time I looked, he was not there – the car was empty! I felt like adrenaline had been injected directly into my heart, and I turned to stare out the windows behind the tellers, just to collect my thoughts, and then... through them I saw this crazy old man pass by, his face smeared with chocolate... He was just walking on by, holding his candy bar, staring up at the sky as if maybe his next operating instructions were up there.” (4)

Our operating instructions, by God's grace, are indeed written down. The way of the Christian life is to love beyond measure. To love and care for aging parents and little children, to love ourselves, and to love others as we love ourselves. To love our enemies – how heart breaking is that? Because people who love deeply, suffer too. We suffer nearly unbearable grief. We go about trying to mend fences and build bridges, and we find ourselves disappointed that the world around us isn't a little more loving in return. We watch Jesus feed the crowds with few resources, and heal sick people miraculously, but cannot help but feel sometimes that our feeding, healing ministry comes up short. But when we exhaust ourselves for doing good, as Anne Lamott was caring for her ill and aging father, the Beatitudes direct our gaze upward toward a very special mountain so we can see our operating instructions, written by God's own finger against the sky.

In your love and compassion for one another, and for those in need, they say – you are blessed. When your heart breaks for the love of another – you are blessed. When your faith in yourself is in tatters – you are blessed. When your innocence butts up against evil in the world – you are blessed. God is unusually gracious toward those who have little in the eyes of the world, and to those who seek community with God and one another. The blessings of God do not make sense in a common sense kind of way, but they make perfect sense in the mind of God. They come to the world's most unlikely recipients, sometimes even – to us.

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Fred Craddock, "Hearing God's Blessing," *The Christian Century*, Jan. 24, 1990.
- 2) Kierkegaard quote from Fred Anderson, "Why Did No One Laugh?" Madison Ave. Presbyterian Church, 1/30/05.
- 3) Jon Walton, Moveable Feast paper, 2011.
- 4) Anne Lamott quote from Barbara Lemmel, "Eavesdropping," *The Christian Century*, Jan. 1999.