

Matt. 5:1-12  
Jan. 29, 2017  
year A - 4 Epiphany  
The Fullness of God's Blessing

Today's Scriptures share a common theme: what kind of people are we? What are we meant to be? This past week many of us watched or read the news with disbelief, and we wept over the inhumanity. So this question, what kind of people are we, anyway? - is right in front of us.

The Beatitudes are not 'new' teachings. They are collected ancient understandings of the people of God. Of all the Gospels, Matthew is most clear that the Hebrew Scriptures (which we call the Old Testament) are very much part of what we call the New Testament.

The narrative in the first chapters of Matthew mirrors the sequence in Exodus: e.g., stories of slaughter of infants, the passing through water, temptation in the wilderness, and lawgiving on the mountain. The opening verse of today's passage - *when Jesus saw the crowds he went up the mountain* - alludes to Moses' ascent of Mt. Sinai.

The first level of our understanding of the Beatitudes is the background or the context which cannot be skipped. Indirect quotations from Isaiah 61 are embedded in the Beatitudes. The proclamations of good news to the poor and healing of the broken hearted come from Isa. 61:1. The comforting of all those who mourn echo Isaiah's words to the dispirited people of the exile in the fifth century BCE. (Isa. 61:2) Jesus repeats these words of comfort to the people living under Roman oppression in the first century. After the temple's destruction and Jerusalem's devastation in the war of 66-74 CE, the author of Matthew wrote down these words for his community as Jesus' Gospel.

In the ancient context of the exile and the first century Roman occupation, 'mourning' was not about loss of loved ones as we might hear it today, but more about the sadness of the faithful who experience injustice, violence, exploitation, at the hands of their oppressors. I mourn the people who were jerked off airplanes or held by airport security - even though they had valid, vetted entry papers - after President Trump issued his executive order yesterday.

Jesus' teaching - *blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted* - offers assurance that the oppressive state of the world is far from God's purposes.

A second level of meaning lies in how these words are heard today.

Many of us equate 'blessed' with 'happy'. You may even have been taught the Beatitudes as *happy are the poor in spirit*, etc. The concepts of blessed and happy are not synonymous, and to assume they can be equated leads to some perversions.

Perhaps you've heard someone say something like this: *I saw poor people in the streets of*

*(Mexico) they were happy. Let's not be so quick to change their lives by giving them money'* That, of course, is an excuse *not* to help the poor — because they are already 'happy.' Or blessed by God. That's the Beatitude, right? There is a bitter irony there.

We are determined to be happy – we think we *should* be happy. *Happy* is the state we strive to achieve. Because we think that's the point of life. The Declaration of Independence declares our *right* to life, liberty and the *pursuit of happiness*. Still, we are surprised to find that getting what we *want* does not make us *happy*. 'Blessed' does not mean happy in the sense of pleasure and prosperity.

God's 'blessing' in the Beatitudes is not a call to find consolation in the experiences of injustice. Listen to the eschatological statement that in the kingdom of heaven, things will be different. Although we are comforted by the promise of God's future reversal of the injustices, these teachings are not about enduring injustice.

Jesus teaches that the way of the world is not God's way, and it's not the way of the Kingdom.

The Beatitudes are much more than a series of linear declarations, a list of blessings drawn from Hebrew Scripture. There is a core image around which the details appear – like an icon which has a focus, a climax at the center.

That central focus tying these teachings together is 'blessing'. What does that mean? We say 'bless you' when someone sneezes. We bless God: in the Eucharistic prayer we say, *'blessed are you, gracious God.'* We ask God to bless us.

The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible offers this definition of *bless* and *blessing*: "*words and ritual acts associated with blessing are the primary means by which divine favor is invoked, distributed, acknowledged, and lauded in biblical and kindred Israelite, Jewish and Christian traditions.*" It is an active concept, a means. Blessings are sought and celebrated. All blessings flow from our creator, and we, in turn, bless God in acts of worship and praise.

Bless, blessed, blessing – not static but active, inviting our participation, our collaboration. Blessing is part of our covenant relationship with God. Blessings declare God's favor and encourage appropriate action.

As a child in Sunday School – a Presbyterian Sunday school – I memorized four pieces of Scripture: the Lord's prayer, the Ten Commandments, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes were my favorite – there was something about the sibilant "ss" in 'blessed' that was like a security blanket, a softness that protected and assured me of God's blessing. I had a loving family, comfortable surroundings, and while there were challenges, I felt truly *blessed*.

I attended the Episcopal Church as a teenager. There I encountered the Anglican pronunciation, "bless-ed", as well as the words of the Eucharist in 1928 Prayer Book: the prayer of humble

access [*I am not worthy to gather the crumbs from beneath thy table*] and that form of confession in which we “*bewail[ed] our manifold sins and wickedness which we from time to time most grievously have committed*”.

Those soothing Beatitudes began to sound more like *I was not* among the bless-**ed** – I was not mourning, poor, persecuted. Were all the things that I had previously counted as blessings, in some mysterious way, things I should find embarrassing, things counted against me in the divine economy? It seemed that Jesus pronounced blessings on the lowliest of people, not people like me.

The simplicity of my earliest understanding – of receiving God’s grace and being included in the Kingdom realm – gave way to hearing the Beatitudes as entrance requirements for the Kingdom.

That was not a comfortable part of my faith journey. I absorbed the message that comfort and prosperity are not the unequivocal signs of God’s blessing, of God’s favor. God is not impressed with the impressive. As a writer in *Christian Century* recently put it, “God does not necessarily feel privileged to be among the privileged.” [T. Denise Anderson, *Christian Century* Jan. 4, 2017]

Over time, I came to understand that Jesus’ teachings about blessings, blessed-ness, are about discipleship. And indeed, Matthew’s Gospel says Jesus is talking to his disciples, not to the crowds here.

The Beatitudes require something of us. God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the forgotten, the unvalued: blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek. Blessed also are those who pursue righteousness on behalf of those who are not fully valued as human beings. The merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers are called to action on behalf of those who mourn, who are poor in spirit, who are persecuted. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled; and, if they in turn are persecuted for their actions, God especially blesses them, too.

That is the vision of God’s Kingdom. That is the path of discipleship.

God’s economy is not our economy. God’s values and priorities are different from those of humankind. God does not measure cost and benefit the way we do. This was very much in my mind two weeks ago, when Dale and I went down to Olympia to attend the Attorney General’s press conference announcing a bill drop – the bill proposes to end the death penalty in Washington State. The speakers talked about the several decades of the appeals process which both the victim families and the accused endure. They presented data on the enormous economic cost to the system ( the tax-paying public) of litigating those appeals and of maintaining an inmate on death row. They cited the high monetary cost of prosecuting death penalty cases as the reason many prosecutors do not to file for the death penalty, resulting in uneven application around the State. One of the persons formerly on death row and recently exonerated by DNA evidence had been incarcerated in the State of Washington. Only one speaker cited the relevance of God’s love – for the victims, the accused and their families – and God’s mercy and promise of forgiveness. God’s economy.

There is much to be said – pro and con– about abolishing the death penalty in favor of life imprisonment. It is a complicated issue. My point is this: these speakers considered the societal & economic costs – time and money – their most persuasive arguments. As disciples who hunger for righteousness, we must bring God’s purposes of love and justice into the discussion.

This past week, Bishop Rickel joined as plaintiff in a federal lawsuit brought by the ACLU against the City of Seattle and Washington State Dept. Of Transportation alleging that routine sweeps of homeless encampments in Seattle violate the rights of these vulnerable people. Traveling on I-5 you can see the pitched tents and cardboard boxes, where the homeless camp in the shelter underneath the freeways. In an encampment sweep, goods and food (provided mostly by area churches) are confiscated and destroyed, as are other belongings: medications, cooking stoves, sleeping bags, clothing, personal papers. One homeless person interviewed in the Seattle Times alleges she lost photos of her daughters and her Bible.

What does Jesus teach in the Beatitudes? These homeless are blessed, favored by God, loved by God. They are being persecuted for having nothing, for being poor, for having nowhere to go. Disciples who hunger for righteousness will continue to provide food and clothing, and to advocate on their behalf.

To be blessed is not *to be asked to become* poor in spirit, or mourners, or persecuted. We are to attune ourselves to the commissioning of Jesus’ disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. We share our humanity and we walk together.

God’s kingdom comes *only* in so far as people take it upon themselves to enter into it – a bilateral, collaborative, effort.

The iconic core, the central fullness of God’s blessing is that God is here, dwelling with us and continually calling us to collaborate in bringing about the Kingdom.

Amen

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