

Moving in With God—Matthew 5: 1-12
(February 5, 2023—5th Sunday after Epiphany)

Back in the fall Heather and I decided in order to give our children's ministry volunteers some relief that we would alternate going with the children on Sunday morning to lead the story portion of Sunday school. I love the time with the kids. But, I have to tell you I have found the preparation to be stressful. If I were in a fundamentalist church I probably would just share the story or teaching as is and defend it as God's word. In our church it's a bit more complex than that. I find myself spending a lot of time trying to get at the essence of a story or a teaching looking for one relatable, simple concept that we can explore together. I struggle with balancing not wanting to oversimplify a story or a teaching but not overwhelming the children either.

For example, two weeks ago the children and I explored this very scripture, the beatitudes, together. I settled on the beatitudes as a teaching by Jesus on what is really important in life. We started by talking about what's important to them, (people, pets, objects etc.) and then we went on to some of the things Jesus said are important. Here are the beatitudes and how I shared them with the children:

- *Blessed are the poor in Spirit:* A lot of people say that having all the answers, knowing everything is important, but if you have all the answers you won't need other people or God. It's more important to be curious and ask questions.
- *Blessed are those who mourn:* A lot of people say it's important to be happy all the time. But it's more important sometimes to be with people who are hurting or in pain to let them know they are not alone.
- *Blessed are the meek:* A lot of people say power (making people do what you want) is important but nobody wants to be treated that way. What's most important is to think about what's good for others and what it means to love other people.
- *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness:* A lot of people say it's important to always get along with others. But it's more important to stand up for people who are being treated badly even if that means you don't get along with the bullies.
- *Blessed are the merciful:* Some people say fairness is important. But, it's more important to do good even if someone can't or won't do good for you.

Finally, I rolled the final four into one:

- *Blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, blessed are you when people*

revile you and persecute you...on my account: Some people say it's important to look out for yourself first. Yes, you need to be good to yourself, but it's important to remember that being good to yourself means you take care of others as well. We need each other.

I hope I struck that balance between staying true to the message and keeping it relatable. I ended there with the children. There was so much more we could've done. This is such a layered scripture. We could've gone on to talk about why Jesus felt these beatitudes were so important.

In doing that, it's important to understand something. The beatitudes aren't instructions or commandments. A beatitude is a blessing or an announcement of God's favour. These nine sentences describe the way things already are. They describe the grace that is already present in the midst of life's gritty realities, the gifts that present themselves to us before we even set out to accomplish anything.¹

These blessings or expressions of God's favour² give nine portraits of who is most likely to experience God, the Holy, the Sacred in the midst of everyday living.³ They are people of the Kingdom as Jesus says, people who live where God rules, people who live where love rules—people, previously known as victims, dreamers, push-overs, and fools. These are the chosen ones, he said, the blessed ones who shall see God. These are the happy ones, the lucky ones, who shall be satisfied. If you want to see and experience the world the way God does, then learn from these weaklings and outcasts Jesus says.⁴ It's the path that takes us deeply into life and into the presence of God.

Why is this important? Because it is our only hope for happiness. Not surface, fleeting happiness. Not, "oooh I get ice cream" happiness. Not, "a new season of my favourite binge show is out" happiness. It's a kind of happiness that is rooted in blessedness. We've been given a holy gift, a way to navigate life that is rooted in relationship, connectedness, communion, interdependence. A way through life that is rooted in the very rhythms of creation. Therefore it is a happiness that is reliable and enduring. This doesn't mean we won't experience conflict with people and institutions that abhor these values. But, we will be true to that deepest part of ourselves that is a reflection of the image of God in which we are created. Many of the people Jesus describes are victimized by the world, but there is a sense in which they are victors as well; through brokenness and vulnerability, they have experienced the power and presence of God in

¹ Fred Craddock, *Hearing God's Blessing* (Matt. 5:1-12), <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=707>

² Craddock

³ Patricia Farris, *Be Happy (Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12)*, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3160>

⁴ William Loader, *First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary Epiphany 4*, <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtEpiphany4.htm>

communion with others⁵, they have gained their lives by losing them.⁶ Those who have been bruised for their faith are not the sad ones but are the happy ones because they have found something worth being bruised for, and that those who are recklessly merciful are just handing out what they have already received in abundance.⁷

In short, it is a happiness rooted in integrity. It is a happiness free from the distractions of power, fear, cynicism, self-reliance, superficiality, resentment, and rivalry that build up our egos and separate us from each other. It is a happiness that sees and lives in, as the late Thomas Merton said, the hidden wholeness at the heart of creation. Jesus might have added at the end, blessed are you because you get it. You know what life is all about, you're not distracted by ego. You see the world as God sees it. You find your worth not in what you do, but in who you are—A child of God.⁸ Is there anything more important than that? May it be so.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

⁵ David Lose, *God Bless You*, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3020>

⁶ Craddock

⁷ Rev. Barbara Brown-Taylor in a sermon entitled *Blessed Are the Upside Down*, from her 1986 book *Gospel Medicine*, page 159. Taylor

⁸ Lose