

A Greenhouse of Hope **Matthew 5:1-12**

Who is this person called Jesus?

Where is he leading?

What kind of life is he calling us toward?

And what is he getting at in today's reading?

For some, this passage, often called the Beatitudes, is a beloved one. But what if I told you that this teaching from Jesus was nothing short of revolutionary in its time? It would have blown away the people who heard it. The village would have buzzed about it for days. It probably got Jesus in trouble, maybe lost him a few followers. Maybe gained him a few, too. Because, in Jesus' time, like our own in many ways, people were considered "blessed" when they were successful, healthy, financially well-off, or in positions of authority or privilege. If you weren't, it was believed that it was probably because you deserved it. And in the face of that cultural perspective, Jesus proclaims this list of blessings, a totally upside-down list of who is blessed.

I like to think that the Beatitudes invite us to the heart of our spiritual practice of love and compassion. We too live in a world that promotes the values of power, self-sufficiency, force and even violence to get the job done. The Beatitudes claim that the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers and the mourners are at the heart of true living. Theologian Tom Long remarks, that the ones who are struggling and mistreated are the very ones that Jesus claims are truly joyful.

I invite you to get curious about that statement from Tom Long. For what one of us has a perfect life, a life without pain or struggle, a life where we have only gained and ignored our losses? The Beatitudes invite us into the sacred realm of mourners and strugglers. And there is no telling whom we might meet in this territory: the poor, the peacemakers, the justice-seekers, the hopeful, those who grieve, but who have found a way to move on into life with a different kind of depth and wonder.

Instead of promoting perfect behavior, Jesus' words invite us into a real life, a life where we meet God through every-day faithfulness. A kind of holy life together, where we find God and each other by encountering God's grace in the pain and struggle of a world suffering for justice, peace, joy, and hope.

To embrace the Beatitudes as our own beautiful vision within this community of faith puts God, not only at our center, but God at every corner we turn, upsetting our assumptions about the

path we are on, demanding we take a step deeper into the mystery of the divine presence dwelling in our midst and in the world. I believe that God is calling us as a congregation to a time of following the Beloved out into the world, to engage more deeply as broken-open, hope-filled, courageous human beings. Instead of leaving our broken lives at the entrance, the invitation is to bring it all along with us on the journey into the future. Not only will our struggles ground us, but our struggles also open us to the way.

One caution as we move on, there have been times that the Beatitudes have been sentimentalized, even overly spiritualized. But they are much deeper than a surface level spirituality; the Beatitudes hold out hope for the poor, not only in spirit, and for the suffering, not only the suffering of everyday life, but the real suffering of the world. We think of news stories that this week alone have touched and broken our hearts. The promise of the blessing is that God is with us, holding onto blessing amid the unbearable brokenness of the world.

Many people from Parkminster attended the session with Trinity Centres Foundation a couple of weeks ago for their Lifting the Lid presentation – and as it has been shared this is one of many opportunities that the congregation and others will have to explore possibilities for our future together. Part of what we were tasked at this gathering was to share our hopes and dreams together for life and ministry at Parkminster in the days, weeks, and years to come. You may find it interesting that the presenters from Trinity Centres Foundation were struck at what a strong, vital, and healthy congregation Parkminster is amid changing tides for many churches in our city, our Region and yes, the world. Could it be that God is calling us to a new dream for our congregation? Could it be that we might be or become a Beatitudes congregation? A community that embraces even more deeply our ministry to those in need, the broken-hearted, the lost and searching of the world? Could we be a congregation that brings more blessings to each other and to those beyond us?

One of my professional goals for this year has been to further explore church leadership and transformation in a changing time. Recently I came across a book edited by Dori Baker entitled *Greenhouses of Hope*. Baker, a writer, and journalist, traveled throughout the United States looking for churches who might reflect a Beatitudes stance, churches committed to reaching out in innovative ways to the neighborhood and surrounding communities. Churches creating hospitable space for people's doubts and dreams. Churches where people belong to God and one another for the sake of the world. Churches where people realize they have something beautiful and valuable to offer, because they have seen both sides of the beautiful vision of the realm of God and the profound suffering of the world.

What struck me about her work was Baker's interest in ministry with young adults and students. It planted seeds of curiosity in me about Parkminster's proximity to two universities and a college. Baker was looking for places that she describes as Greenhouses of Hope. A Greenhouse of Hope is a congregation freeing itself to both newly imagined and time-honoured ways of following the path of Jesus.

In a chapter called "Living Together," Baker encourages us to embrace our congregational life as a kind of incubator for making disciples in the world. She affirms the work with young people that some of the congregations she visited had embraced and at the same time challenges churches to open their doors in hospitable ways to those who are searching for a wider community of faith. A community defined by its desire to reach outward toward others who are suffering and longing for more justice and love in their lives. A community of believers in the Beatitudes. While we may not have been featured in her book, I believe that Parkminster is one of these places.

Elizabeth O'Connor, who authored a book inspired by her leadership at the Church of the Saviour in Washington DC many years ago, describes an ecumenical church there, out of which the Potter's House and approximately 50 other ministries have been born. This exciting story captures how the Christian life can be a vital, life-giving, and challenging experience. Sometimes called an "unconventional or non-traditional church", the Church of The Saviour is a church firmly rooted in the first-century church, where members are continually discovering again for the first time what it is that God wants to accomplish in and through them.

O'Connor has said that every single person has work to do in life. This good work not only accomplishes something needed in the world, but it completes something in us. When it is finished a new work emerges that will help us to make green a desert place.

She challenges faith communities to be open to transformation while still being rooted in the spiritual foundations of who they are and who they are called to be. She writes, "The good news is that these structures are the work of ordinary folk. If they were the work of the spiritually gifted or of those, who had it all together or were especially wise, the rest of us could pass them by, as not relevant to our lives. As it is now, they let us know that all things are possible. They teach us that at the center of our lives are the vast storehouses of untapped resources needed for the restoration of our communities and our world."

How can we more deeply embrace this vision of blessings and being blessed here at Parkminster? Could we be a Greenhouse of Hope for those who are searching to grow in faith, hungering for justice and longing for kindness? I think we already are, and I am excited about

what can be when we live, grow, dream and work together as people of faith, grounded in Christ and trusting in the Spirit.

We see in the Beatitudes, a new work in an ancient pattern. Blessed are those who will help make green a desert place for all God's creation. For we are indeed blessed, and one of those blessings is that we are part of a beloved community where we can bring all these things and find in them a blessing we can share with others. May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Heather Power