

4th Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

I love the Beatitudes. I love the Beatitudes because they are both alarmingly simplistic and radically subversive.

They're alarmingly simplistic because in this moment when Jesus encounters a massive crowd of people, he doesn't recite a 100-page dissertation on some complex doctrine. He says blessed are the poor. Blessed are the sad. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the hungry.

The simplicity of the message is disarming. It's disarming because the poetic repetitiveness drives home a truth about the Kingdom of Heaven - a truth that a lot of people don't like to hear. And for that reason, the Beatitudes are also radically subversive.

They're radically subversive because the Beatitudes fly in the face of conventional wisdom. They brashly challenge those in power who would probably choose to recite a very different version of the the Beatitudes if given the opportunity. Perhaps something like this:

- Blessed are those with strong investment accounts, for the stock market will make them richer.

- Blessed is the loudest person in the room, for his voice shall drown out all others.
- Blessed is the politician who collects money from the lobbyists, for they shall be re-elected.
- Blessed is the man accused of sexual misconduct, for they shall be believed over the woman.
- Blessed are the violent, for they shall bully their way to getting what they want.
- Blessed is the straight, white man for the deck is stacked in his favor.

Do you hear how different those sound from what Jesus said? It sounds grotesque but sometimes it helps to hear the *opposite* of something in order to fully appreciate how radical it is.

As I mentioned earlier in my time with the children, we believe firmly that God loves everyone and, therefore, so should we. However, the Beatitudes remind us that God has a special place in God's heart for those who aren't at the front of the line, those who struggle to pick themselves up, those who have had the deck stacked against them.

The Beatitudes are God's love poem to those people in whom God especially loves to work.

Yesterday, I gathered with many other folks to worship at Pisgah Presbyterian Church to install my good friend, Hannah McIntyre, as their newest pastor. A friend of hers, and a new colleague of mine, Carol Ferguson, preached an incredible sermon on today's passage and I've received her permission to share with you something that she said yesterday:

"The proud give God little room to work. The violent give God little room to work. The unjust, the vengeful, the cynical - they take up so much space that grace can barely squeeze in around the edges. But when we feel our smallest, when our faith has fallen down around our feet, when our hearts are shattered in a million pieces, when we whisper words of peace amongst the rallying war cries - when we feel like we are nothing in the sight of the world, that we hold no influence or power - that is when God's grace flows freely around us, empowering us, emboldening us, reminding us that we are blessed."

I was grateful to hear such prophetic words yesterday and I'm grateful to share them with you today. I'm grateful because they remind me that those of us who sometimes feel so hopeless and despondent during these times of rampant injustice, that we are not forgotten in God's eyes. Those who struggle for justice, those who hunger for peace, those who are relentless practitioners of mercy, those folks give God so much more delight than those who beat their chests while they roar and rage.

And therefore, the poetic challenge of the Beatitudes compels us to look for the folks around us and within us who are blessed in God's eyes.

- Blessed is the black teenager who has been told that he can't attend his high school graduation unless he cuts off his dreadlocks, because he shall find justice in the midst of racism.
- Blessed are the climate activists, for they shall save the world.
- Blessed are the teachers who are underpaid and under appreciated, for they shall gift the next generation with wisdom, compassion, and truth.

- Blessed are those who speak truth in the midst of lies, for they shall keep us accountable to one another.
- Blessed is the single mother who works three part-time jobs to support her children, for her love will be infectious.
- Blessed is the parent who loses a child, because they shall know the love of their friends and family.
- Blessed is child who is bullied, for they shall receive compassion.

What Beatitudes would *you* add to the list?

Now, it is important to remind ourselves that we must *never* use the Beatitudes to romanticize the notion of injustice. Rather, the Beatitudes serve as a potent and poetic reminder that those who have been marginalized hold a special place in God's heart. The folks mentioned in the Beatitudes get the lion's share of God's attention and therefore, if we are to proclaim that we are made in the image of God, they should be the focus of *our* attention as well.

We who are Beaumont Presbyterian Church are growing in our understanding of what it means to refocus our attention to the community around us and to actively seek out those who are struggling and hurting. When congregations such as our inevitably find ourselves in autopilot, the Beatitudes serve as a jolt to bring us back to the reality of the nature of God.

God will *always* take the side of the poor. God will *always* take the side of the meek, the mild, and the mourning. God will *always* take the side of those who promote peace and hunger for righteousness. God will *always* take the side of those who are crying out for mercy and those who are eager to show it.

There are some who think that the Church should be a neutral institution. But that's just not what the Beatitudes teach us. The Church is not called to be neutral. The Church must take a side because *God* takes a side.

In a few minutes, you and I will gather around this Table for a meal to proclaim and celebrate the Resurrection. The Resurrection is all the proof we need that God is not a neutral God. The Resurrection is God choosing life over death. The Resurrection is God choosing justice over injustice. The Resurrection is God choosing peace over violence. The Resurrection is God choosing the meek over the mean, the merciful over the merciless, and the oppressed over the oppressor.

So blessed are you - here, now, today - who come to this Table, for here gather the poor in spirit, the meek and mild, the hungry, the persecuted, the sad and the anxious. Blessed are you, and blessed are we, for we worship a God who will not rest until all has been made right.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**