

January 29, 2017 – Blessed Are...

Matthew 5:1-12

The reading that you just heard is traditionally called the Beatitudes. The author of the gospel of Matthew has placed this passage at the beginning of a sermon that Jesus gave to his disciples and to the crowds that joined them on a mountain in Galilee. In this sermon Jesus lays out his mission, his hopes, and his plans for the people of Israel. He describes his vision of God's reign on earth - his idea of what heaven on earth would look like. In many ways this sermon is like an inaugural address.

So what was Jesus saying? Well you can imagine that his words were very different from the ones we heard from the new President of the United States just over a week ago. Jesus' vision did not include walls of separation, new tariffs, an enlarged military, or a promise of increased wealth for a single nation. Trump's speech was, as the LA Times described it "raw and angry and aggrieved."

<http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-inauguration-speech-analysis-20170120-story.html>

In contrast, Jesus' words were poetic, prophetic and profound. Many ministers have preached a series of sermons on the beatitudes, focussing on one verse at a time. It would be impossible to give every blessing the focus it deserves in just one sermon. So today you're getting an overview – we're going look at the passage in two sections..

The first section is made up of four verses (*next slide*). Blessed are: “those who are poor in spirit,” “those who are mourning,” “those who are gentle,” (also translated as meek) and “those who hunger and thirst for justice.”

Well it’s interesting to note that Jesus didn’t say, “Blessed are the mighty, blessed are the rich, blessed are the powerful or blessed are the famous.” In the first four lines of this sermon, Jesus made it clear that his message was for those who are hurting, those who are struggling, and those who are on the margins of society. This is the same message that he gave to people in his home town of Nazareth, in the fourth chapter of Luke, when Jesus announced that he had come “to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives... to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). Jesus’s message was and is a message of hope for those in need of good news.

Jesus wasn’t telling the people with him on that mountain that they should be grieving, or meek, depressed or oppressed. He was telling them that if they were struggling in some way, God was with them and there was hope for change in their lives (*next slide*). He said, “The kingdom of heaven is theirs,” “they will be consoled, “they will inherit the land,” and “they will have their fill of justice.”

Jesus was preaching that the world as they knew it was about to be turned upside down. He was telling them that the Spirit was at work in the world and heaven on earth was possible.

Jesus was telling them they were blessed. But what does that mean? What do you mean when you say, “They are blessed”, or “they have been blessed”, or to wish blessings on someone?” (*wait for answers.. happy, fortunate, have wealth, prosperous, family, friends, work*) We have many different ways that we can be blessed. Biblical scholars tell us that that the meaning of this word changes throughout the scriptures and you can really only determine its meaning by studying the context of the passage in which the word is found. Some would argue that, especially in the gospels, the word “blessed” refers to our connection with God or Spirit – that to be blessed is to be deeply grounded in the love, the compassion, the creativity that is the core or ground of our being (Susan McCaslin, [Arousing the Spirit](#), p. 150). If we define blessedness in this way, then, in the first four verses, Jesus was telling his followers, “don’t worry God is with you – you are not alone – you are blessed.”

Then in the next four verses, he told his followers what they needed to do in order to experience God more fully, in order to create the kingdom of heaven or God’s reign on earth. He said (*next slide*), “blessed are those”: “who show mercy,” “whose hearts are clean (or pure),” “who work for peace,” and “who are persecuted because of their struggle for justice.” There is definitely nothing there about building walls, or increasing power or hoarding wealth. In fact, these blessings tend to reverse all the values of the society in which we live. These blessings are a roadmap to a new way of living, they are a way of turning the world upside down.

I'm not suggesting that any of these paths are easy. And neither was Jesus. He acknowledged the fact that others in society would not understand and would even persecute them. That is still true today. So much of what we are asked to do as Christians is counter-cultural. So much of what we are asked to do requires openness and courage and understanding.

As I was sitting in my office yesterday writing this sermon all around me was the bustle of preparation for last night's supper and auction: a fundraising event to raise money to support the Etmeh's, a family of Syrian refugees, and Dorie's house, a place of refuge for teenagers in our community. I couldn't help but contrast that work of understanding and generosity and courage with Friday's executive order from President Trump, an order that put a 90-day ban on all entry to the United States from five predominantly Muslim countries, an order that was based totally on prejudice and fear. I invite you to remember the pictures and the stories of the family that shared their lives with us last night and imagine Anas, Heba, Shahed and Mohammed being denied sanctuary because of fear.

As we do the work of forgiveness and right living and peacemaking and justice, the blessings that we receive are the gifts of a deeper connection to the sacred (*next slide*). But it is only if we open our eyes, our ears and especially our hearts that we can truly receive them: mercy (grace – freely given), the ability to see God (to know and connect with the sacred in a deep and meaningful way), to truly know that we are named as blessed children of God, and to recognize that

the peace and justice-filled reign of God is here on earth and we are a part of it

Blessed be. Amen.