

**“A BLESSING WORTH FIGHTING FOR”**

**Matthew 5:1-12**

**February 2, 2020**

*Today’s reading is from Matthew, chapter 5, beginning with the first verse. This passage begins the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew’s imagining of the pastoral side of Jesus. What do you feel as you listen to the message today? How do these words touch your life? Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people of God:*

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.

*Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

Jesus has a distinct pastoral side. Matthew displays this in The Beatitudes, the beginning movement in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's own vision of what it must have been like to hear Jesus preach. The New Revised Standard version of Matthew's account that I had Angie read you today reads like free-flowing poetry:

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

Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they shall be comforted...

However wonderful they are to listen to, Matthew's Beatitudes do not automatically invite us to get emotionally involved in the message. They are written in passive tense, and it's easy to feel distance from them, like they were meant for someone else. They don't really call us to *do* anything or *be* anything other than what we already know we are: The Blessed and Faithful People of God.

So, who are the people who are poor in spirit? Jesus doesn't tell us. Who are the pure in heart? Jesus doesn't give us any clues here either. I suppose you could self-select. If you have felt abandoned by God and church, perhaps it resonates with you that you are one of the "poor in spirit." I don't know. Maybe that means someone who has a bad temperament. I certainly can understand that connection. In the Greek, *ptochos*-poor-means "one who crouches or cowers, the poor." And Spirit is *pneumati*. Maybe that helps you get a picture in

your mind, maybe not. To me it sounds like someone who is ashamed before God. Does anyone really fit that bill?

As for the phrase, “pure of heart,” again the Greek gives us wide parameters, but not much specificity. “Pure” in Greek is *kathari*, or clean. “Heart,” *kardia*, is “heart.” Not much help there. Pure of heart or clean of heart is open for speculation. Maybe it is a person who is *not* ashamed before heart. How is that possible that both the ashamed and clean of heart are both blessed? We struggle to connect.

And the whole bit about being persecuted, well, that is just very far removed from the mainline American Christian post-modern experience, isn't it? Maybe... if you happen to be a white affluent male heterosexual employed mentally well addiction free happily married father of two mainline white heterosexual successful kids who are also mentally well and addiction free. If you don't fit in that box, well, you just might hear Jesus' words with different ears.

Mainline religion, especially the kind that practices closed-door Christianity, has an easier time with Matthew's Beatitudes, for Matthew's metaphor, if you remember, is the mountain.

His Beatitudes allows us, if we choose, to passively watch from up there at altitude those who just can't bring themselves to love God the way we do. We can sit a safe distance away from those who grieve and just can't “get over it” in a reasonable amount of time. We can barely see from up there the tears of marginalized people who may seem meek and accepting, but really just lack voice and power. Yes, we can sit up on Matthew's mountain and assure ourselves that somebody else will bless these poor people; that's not our job.

It's a safe place we occupy from a distance away. We are allowed to give ourselves permission to impassively observe from our safe places, far away from the cries of the border children who hunger and thirst for righteousness; far from persons who live in the shadow and obscurity of homelessness; safely distanced from teenagers who have to choose what restroom to go into in school, not feeling aligned with their birth-assigned gender.

Rob Bell, a celebrity former megachurch pastor-gone-rogue, has been recently condemned by evangelicals as a heretic. This is because of his personal epiphany and new statement of belief that God loves all people unconditionally. This recent awareness, which parallels our own at UCCPH, flies in the face of atonement and sacrifice theology, that Jesus had to die on the cross because God demanded his own son's sacrifice for our sins. Bell has rejected the salvation theology so identifiable in evangelical Christianity, that to escape hell and have everlasting life one must accept Jesus as one's personal Lord and Savior.

Bell indicts the exclusionary path evangelical Christianity has taken. He laments, "Somewhere along the way, the Jesus Movement got hijacked, and thousands of years later, it ran into 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism."

Contrast Matthew's arms-crossed Pharisees listening impassively to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with gospel writer Luke, who writes his account of the Beatitudes in active voice. Luke's metaphor is the road, and Jesus walks the road with those who typically walk alone in this world. Jesus speaks to those who mainstream religion chooses to ignore, who are cast aside:

Blessed are *you* poor,  
for *yours* is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are you that hunger *now*,

for you shall be *satisfied*.  
Blessed are you that weep now,  
for you shall *laugh*.

See the difference? Matthew is writing to lawyers about the *law*. Luke is writing *to the oppressed* about God's love so they won't give up hope that God is with them and God will restore them. Both writers are speaking after the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Second Temple, but Matthew is speaking to the Pharisees and Luke is writing to the folks living in the gutters below the Temple Mount.

The Beatitudes were never intended to support the status quo. Neither Matthew nor Luke are talking about easy piety. They are talking about the hard work of living in covenant with God's will for justice and compassion. The wisdom teachings of Jesus, including the Beatitudes, are designed to confound the rational mind, to tie the sturdy heart into knots, to challenge the time-worn ways of being in the presence of the Holy One. Perhaps while the mind is occupied with the riddle, the heart may be loosened, thereby accepting the grace of fuller understanding.

We were never supposed to be so self-righteously *satisfied* with our religious practice. We were never intended to stop searching, to stop asking, "Who *am* I?" and "What am I *doing* here?" We were supposed to recognize our place in the great Universal Longings, those questions your *heart* asks your *soul* when your *mind* is convinced that there is no one any longer upstairs!

We *need* the Bible, we *need* the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments and Jesus and the prophets and all the stories, oh the

stories, because they are *our stories, too*. They are messy. They are rich. They are troubling. They give us hope. They cause us to ask, What. Is. The. Point. Of. All. This?

These are our foundational stories, but our culture is burying them as irrelevant relics of a time gone by. We are the wealthiest nation in the *history of the planet* and yet, we operate from a culture of scarcity. Churches are closing left and right, no longer relevant, no longer safe for so many. Prayer lights are growing dim, the petitions shallow and narcissistic, our willingness and ability to listen blocked out by so much outside interference. Our children are not being taught about God's love, and they see no reason to be involved in church community. Of our 72 churches in the Rocky Mountain Conference, only about 12 are sending teens to the UCC National Youth Convention this year- 12! Our church—*our little church* that with dedication and devotion has become a place of invitation for kids, will be one of the larger—if not THE largest-contingent on the bus! Yay us, but boo, too, boo and sadness for the future of our churches. Along with the growing scarcity of resources, including children, and the dearth of healthy ministry settings throughout the communities of faith, our connection to God and grace and justice and what really matters in life is getting buried in the culture that values wealth and power, division and safekeeping of all of the above.

Religious mediocrity, Christian apathy, and cultural entitlement: these are the stones making up the new Temple that must be torn down. This 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century model of prosperity gospel—we are blessed because we-decree-it-so and our-money-and-power-prove-it-so is antithetical to everything Jesus taught for, fought for, and died for.

Matthew in the NRSV and in The Message give us the Beatitudes in alternative voices:

Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are you who are at the end of your rope!

Blessed are the meek.... Blessed are you when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right.

Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are you when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

Let me tell you a short story: There was an Irishman who died and was taken up to heaven. The story of his encounter there goes something like this:

After a long life here on earth, a man breathes his last and arrives at the Pearly Gates. He asks St. Peter to be let into heaven. "Of course," says the saint. "Just show us your scars."

"I have no scars," replies the man. "What a pity," St. Peter responds. "Was there nothing worth fighting for?"

Sweet Honey in the Rock is an African American female vocal chorus. They performed their version of the Beatitudes in Carnegie Hall many years ago. It is another poetic voice sung from yet another context, another interpretation of the familiar teaching in Matthew. I'm going to play it for you now, with the sanctuary lights dimmed. I invite you to step out of your own context for these few minutes, close your eyes, and listen to this song, sung as an anthem by people who do not share our dominant cultural privilege.

[*Beatitudes*. Sweet Honey in the Rock" plays now. Google it, download it, put down your stuff and listen to it—it will move you]

What could Jesus be saying to us if we didn't manipulate his words to our will? In case you are struggling with this query, let me assure you that you haven't left the Christian tradition when you question it—questions ARE the tradition that our scriptures and our stories are built on. We have to let ourselves be broken on occasion so that we can be re-created. So may grace and peace be with us every step of the way...Yes, *May it Be So*.

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