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First Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 5:1-12

**“The Message of Jesus: The Beatitudes”**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> in a Lent Series**

We’re in week 3 of our Lent sermon series “The Message of Jesus: Words that Changed the World.” Last week Carrie talked about the “I Am” sayings of Jesus, and the first week I talked about the kingdom of God.

Now, if the kingdom of God is Jesus’s driving vision, the Sermon on the Mount, or what Luke calls the Sermon on the Plain, is our road map for how we are to live out that vision. And both sermons begin the same way: with the Beatitudes.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus has been on the move and on a mission. He’s recruited disciples, announced the kingdom of heaven has come near, and called people to repent. Turn from your old ways, he says, and join this new movement where we are turning the world as we know it upside down.

And this is essentially what the Beatitudes do; they turn life as we know it upside down. Blessed are those who mourn? Blessed are the meek? Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of vile against you falsely? Does any of that sound like a blessing to you? It sure doesn’t to me. When people tell me to have a blessed day, I don’t think they’re hoping my day includes persecutions and vile accusations. If someone says they’re blessed, I don’t think they’re saying they are poor in spirit, do you?

In fact, I’d go so far as to say (which really doesn’t ask me to go all that far), that what we really believe is that the blessed *are wise*, for they will not be taken advantage of. Or the blessed are those *with power*, for their enemies shall fear them. Or the blessed are *wealthy*, for they shall never go hungry.

Isn’t that what being blessed means? C’mon, let’s be honest! We’re among friends; we all know that a person who is “blessed” is a faith-filled Christian who knows their prayers are heard because their wealth and health shows it. Isn’t that what the prosperity gospel preachers preach? And in popular culture, to be blessed (#blessed) includes power, happy families, peace of mind, joyful

marriages, and a total sense of victory (<https://katebowler.com/blessed/>). In some circles today the blessed may even be referred to as the “winners.”

But here comes Jesus saying “no, no, you’ve got it all wrong. The hungry. The oppressed. Those who mourn . . . the ones who some people might call “the losers”, they are the ones who are blessed.”

(Now that turns our world upside down.)

And as hard as it may be to hear, the folks who listened to Jesus that day long ago, they were considered losers by many people. They were largely poor and lived under Roman occupation; their collective history was one of exile and deportation. They paid enormous taxes to support a society from which they derived very few benefits, and their life expectancy was shorter than the “winners” and their infant mortality rate was higher. Does that sound blessed to you? Added to all of this: Their living conditions were noisier, more crowded, more dangerous, and less sanitary. (And) their children received an inferior education, entered the workforce at a younger age, and nurtured very few dreams of social advancement.

(Indeed) the people who listened to Jesus’s sermon that day had been promised much over the years but had very little to show for it. In the covenant promise made by God with their patriarch Abraham, their nation was to have been as populous as the stars in the sky but instead was a small and scattered lot blown across the arid landscape of the ancient Middle East. Their temple had been defiled with sacrificial offerings in Caesar’s name and They were governed by a king whose primary allegiance was to Rome and were counseled in matters of the faith by a high priest who was paid handsomely to serve at the pleasure of the pagan emperor. And they themselves were at odds with one another; on one end of the theological spectrum you had the Zealots and at the other end the Pharisees.

But it would be presumptuous to say the people gathered to hear Jesus’s sermon held out hope that he would really change things, because they’d heard plenty of pseudo saviors over the years who were long on promise but short on deliverance. So when Jesus got up to deliver his sermon, they were largely skeptical. Would his message really be any different than the others?

And so he begins:

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

<sup>4</sup> “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup> “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup> “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup> “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Now that! That was different! It was the great reversal from what they had been hearing! Jesus’s sermon wasn’t at all what they expected! It was counter cultural and deeply, deeply subversive.

And what made it so subversive was that Jesus wasn’t just making promises for the future; he was declaring a new reality in the present. You are blessed now! Not, you will be blessed in the future. But you are blessed right here, right now! The Beatitudes weren’t just hopeful words about heaven; they were a radical redefinition of what mattered in God’s kingdom here and now. The poor in spirit weren’t just going to be blessed someday—they already were. Those who mourn weren’t simply waiting for comfort in eternity—they were being drawn into God’s embrace in that very moment. The meek weren’t just going to inherit the earth in the future—their way of humility and love was already more powerful than the world’s definition of success.

Jesus was turning everything upside down, not just in some distant dream but in real time. And this was good news—good news for those who had been cast aside, those who had been told they didn't matter, and those who had suffered under systems of power and oppression. But it was also a challenge for those who were comfortable, and those who had built their lives around the values of power, wealth, and status. Because if Jesus was right, then everything they thought they knew about success and security was about to be redefined.

And that's the challenge for us today, friends, is it not? If Jesus meant what he said—if the kingdom of God really does belong to the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers—then what does that mean for how we live as his followers? How does it shape the way we treat one another, the way we use our resources, and the way we engage with the world around us? These questions matter, especially now. And if these are the people who matter most to God, how ought they matter to the church?

I read something recently that might help us in this regard. Dr. Raj Nadella who is a NT professor at Columbia Seminary, teaches that the most common translation of the Beatitudes doesn't fully capture the force of the Greek word at the end. That word is “*parakleytheyson tai*” which is derived from the Greek word *paraclete*. In the first-century Greek or Roman context, “*paraclete*” meant an advocate, specifically a legal advocate. A *paraclete* was someone you called to stand by your side and fight for you.

This means that a more accurate translation of the Beatitudes, for example, is: “Blessed are those who are poor in Spirit because they will be advocated on behalf of. Blessed are those who are meek, for they will be advocated on behalf of. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be advocated on behalf of.”

This does not mean that Comfort and consolation for those who mourn or are poor in spirit are not helpful or essential; they are. But they are not nearly sufficient. Merely comforting individuals and communities who are mourning due to hunger, violence and injustice might address the symptoms of their situation but does little to change the roots of their suffering. As followers of Jesus, we are called to advocate on behalf of the oppressed and do everything in our capacity to reverse their current situation. When we see people weeping because of hunger, or violence, or losing their jobs unfairly or having their loved ones taken away when due process is the law, we're called to do more than offer comfort. If

we consistently privilege comfort over advocacy, we risk comforting the oppressor rather than the oppressed. As Walter Brueggemann warns, “We should refuse to be comforted in the face of social failure.” Jesus’s message isn’t just about soothing words; it’s about real change.

The late Kurt Vonnegut said one time that if you want to discover the meaning and potential of human life, you might start with the Beatitudes. “That one about the meek inheriting the earth,” Vonnegut said, “is the best idea anyone ever had.” But he went to observe that “vocal Christians, often with tears in their eyes, demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. I haven’t heard anybody demand that the Beatitudes be posted anywhere,” he wrote (“Cold Turkey,” *In These Times*).

Now why do you think that is?

Perhaps it’s because Turning weeping into joy takes more than sentiment—it takes action. And that’s hard. But Jesus, our ultimate Paraclete, leads the way in advocating for those who mourn.

So we hold on to these ancient words even when the world is upside down because we’re called to make it right side up.

So let us hold on to faith, that while bullies on horseback may win today, at the end of the day it will be peace and justice and righteousness that will prevail.

Let us hold on to faith that there is a reign of God coming into human history, and that the long arc of human history is toward freedom and equality and kindness and love.

Let us hold on to faith, even in the face of contrary evidence, because Jesus staked his life on it.

Let us hold on to faith, because death did not defeat him; the power of empire, the power of human hatred, cruelty, bigotry, and intolerance did not win on that dark Friday, the irresistible, ultimate, infinite power of love rose and won.

And so this is the invitation Jesus extends to us—to live as if the Beatitudes are not just poetic words but a blueprint for life in God’s kingdom. To embrace humility over power, mercy over judgment, and love over fear. To trust that God’s

way, however countercultural it may seem, is the way that leads to real blessing, real peace, real life. And so today, we gather around him, ready to listen, ready to learn, ready to be transformed, and ready to turn the world with these upside down words, right side up.

Amen.

Sources:

commentary on Matthew 5:1-12, [www.workingpreacher.com](http://www.workingpreacher.com), Raj Nadella, November 1, 2020

Erik Kobell, "What Jesus Meant"

Adam Hamilton, "The Message of Jesus: Words that Matter"