

A Epiphany 4 2017, Matthew 5:1-2

Gospel reading:

When Jesus^[a] 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^[b] 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.

Then Simon Peter said, “Are we supposed to know this?”

And Andrew said, “Do we have to write this down?”

And James said, “Will we have a test on this?”

And Philip said, “I don’t have any paper!(and my iphone is out of power.”

And Bartholomew said, “Do we have to turn this in?”

And John said, “The other disciples didn’t have to learn this!”

And Matthew said, “May I go get a drink?”

And Judas said, “What does this have to do with real life?”

Then one of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus’ lesson plan and inquired of Jesus, “Where is your anticipatory set and your objectives in the cognitive domain?”

And Jesus Wept! (Sent to me by a member, who thought my husband, a teacher, would enjoy it)

And sometimes that is how it is!

There is a danger in hearing a common passage like the beatitudes. The words are so familiar that we lose track of what they mean for us as people of faith.

However, these were powerful words for early Christians and they are powerful for us today.

The Gospel of Matthew, from which today’s beatitudes come, was written to a community not unlike ours.

The book was written sometime around 80 AD.

The Jewish temple had been destroyed in Jerusalem and Jews and Christians were forced to leave the city.

At first they moved together.

But as time went on, the Jewish and Christian community began to separate. There was disagreement, disunity, even divisiveness.

The early church did a lot of struggling.
Life was not easy and I think one crucial question needed to be answered. They need to know, are we still blessed by God?
Life is not what we expected, some of us have lost family to death, or persecution. Are we still blessed by God?
Some of us are hungry and thirsty. Are we still blessed?
Some of us are in deep struggles and are fighting for our lives. Are we still blessed?

And sitting here this evening/morning I am guessing there are at least a few people asking the same question. Are we still blessed by a loving God?

It was questions like these that made Jesus's words in the Beatitudes all the more memorable.

Too often we assume that blessing means happy, healthy, and easy. And when life challenges us or disappoints us, we might begin to wonder, "Has God forgotten me? Has God withdrawn his blessing?"
And what we are left with is a spiritual angst.

But of course, Jesus understood the fears of his followers and he understands whatever anxieties we might have about the disconnect between what God promises and what we see and experience in our current times.

And so he begins his Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes with

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

You are "poor in spirit" when circumstances have somehow broken you open and you have poured out all you have to give and nothing has changed...at least not yet. Eugene Peterson, in his translation, wrote:

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. Because with less of you there is more of God and his rule.

That is where Jesus begins his teaching. All of the rest of the beatitudes flow from the knowledge that God is most active in our lives when we are most vulnerable or when we are in real need, **that** is exactly when we are most open to the blessings of God.

And what is a blessing?

Special favor? Empowerment? A guarantee of happiness? Or health. (After you sneeze, I will say God bless you!) Is it a promise of a better future? Can we earn God's blessing.

All of these ideas fall short of Jesus' understanding of Blessing.

I have mentioned before that translating Jesus' words is not an easy task. Sometimes there just isn't an English way to say what Jesus meant.

One old commentator (Barclay) suggests it should be read "O the blessedness of the *one* who is poor in spirit.

It is not just a statement but an **exclamation**. Like Wow, how blessed is the one who is poor in spirit, (Exclamation point)

And this isn't a future promise but is a blessing for right now in this circumstance. Of course it will be made complete one day when we stand in the presence of God but the blessing is also for now.

My Greek professor didn't like the word "blessing." It wasn't grand enough. We always needed to translate it as "Bliss or Blessed out"

So beatitudes in effect say, "*O the bliss of being a Christian! O the joy of following Christ! O the sheer happiness of knowing Jesus Christ is Master, Savior and Lord!*" (Barclay Matthew 5:3 p. 89) It is a God like joy....better than winning the Super Bowl! It is a joy that cannot be diminished by pain or sorrow but will shine through tears and nothing, not even death can take away. (More Barclay)

I'm going to conclude today with a rereading of the beatitude. The first line will be from the NRSV and the second from Peterson's The Message.

Matthew 5:1-12 The Beatitudes: **You're Blessed!**

Black: New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Red: **The Message (MSG)**

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

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

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

"You're blessed 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.

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

"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

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

"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

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

"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.

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

"You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

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

"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

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

"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely^[b] 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.

“Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, *I* do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.