

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday after Pentecost
July 14, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 61:1-9

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Matthew 5:1-12 NRSV

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.”

Behind the Beatitudes

Around 1988, a very talented songwriter and singer, Bobby McFerrin, recorded a popular song with a reggae beat whose title was its own “catch” line: “**Don’t Worry, Be Happy.**” Of course, it was extremely popular for quite a while, and the phrase made its way into conversations, jokes, political campaigns, and many writings (including this sermon). It is less frequently heard today, and perhaps was replaced with the hit song, “**Happy,**” by Pharrel Williams from earlier in this decade. The popularity of these songs probably ties to an unfortunate expectation in our culture for any number of years: That we are to be **happy, always.**

Now, I do not agree with this approach to life and living, and most psychologists and mental health professional support my view on this. Being “happy” in our **sad times** is one way to cope with upsetting news, a minor spat with you mother or child, a disappointing exam grade, or the news that you need a four-hour blood test. But, when it comes to the larger **calamities** of life, especially those that are unexpected or deeply hurtful, being happy when you really are not becomes a false face: a **mask** for the public and a **lie** to your inner sense of truth. A divorce, the death of a spouse, that dreaded diagnosis, all of these put us into a state of mild to severe **depression** that may linger for months or years. In these situations, many of us put considerable **emotional energy** into putting on a false front in attempt to persuade others that you and I have “Maintained an even strain,” as they say in engineering (or, an even keel in sailing).

So, at times like these we often reach for **support** from many sources: friends, family, our physician, or a crisis counselor. It can be one or all of these that help, along with appropriate medication for specific problems. For those of us with an active spiritual life, **prayer and scripture** can bring a lot of comfort, as well. In situations like these, I often tell parishioners to turn to the *Book of Psalms*, open it at random, and read what you find aloud a couple of times. Some of these poem songs are brief celebrations that glorify God. Others are pure lament, beseeching God to listen and to bring justice for an individual, a family, or a nation. Others are just plain sad, similar to the *Book of Lamentations*. Still others are even more interesting, because they are shouts of **anger** directed at God!

I have known people who recognize this last category and refuse to read or speak these Psalms that rant at God, because they consider it blasphemy. It is as if they fear that a bolt of lightning is coming for them, or that they will be crushed by a falling rock as punishment from the wrath of God. Certainly those events are possible, and God is quite capable of acts of violence. Read *Exodus* and *1 and 2 Kings* if you want a sampling of it. On the other hand, my acquaintances who are **Jewish** tell me that this anger directed at God is pretty **normal** behavior for them, relating to God with everything that is in them: They are God's creation, and God is all-powerful and all-knowing. So, why not shout out at God? Doesn't God **expect us** to do that?

My point in all this, is that we can misuse and misrepresent the intent of scripture by approaching it at face value, **superficially gleaning** what we desire, all the while hoping it will make bad situations quite a bit better. I have to say that I have done this, and I work very hard to avoid it as a trained and ordained pastor. Sometimes, I actually succeed.

So, this superficial approach to **scripture** and the desire to glean what we want from most of the **Bible** contribute to a misinterpretation of most of the **Sermon on the Mount**. If you have heard a sermon on the **Beatitudes**, I suspect that most of the attention was directed at the principal words which we find there: meek, poor in spirit, and pure in heart. A typical sermon or devotion would tout these as **desirable traits** for all "good Christians" to imitate. Our brothers and sisters in the Church of Rome and some Orthodox traditions have taken this literally and promoted living in poverty and humility as full **devotion to God**. Most of us who are financially secure scratch our heads at such behavior. That does not justify our using **scripture** to justify a fortunate accumulation of wealth.

Be aware that Jesus had a lot to say about finances and being rich. But, somehow we believers and many a pastor choose to ignore the words of Jesus that it will be really hard for the wealthy, literally the "filthy rich," to make it to the **kingdom of God**. That is not our area of interest today, and it deserves its own time for study. Instead, I want us to examine **the Beatitudes** and its fuller meaning in relation to its **source**: the very **Jewish man** who spoke the words: **Jesus of Nazareth**. This is appropriate, because Jesus practiced his **Hebrew faith** regularly.

To start this, we have to take on the **underlying meaning** of this uncommon word: **beatitude**. I checked a reliable source in my library, the *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Language*, but it was not much help. The *Webster-Merriam Dictionary* describes **beatitude** as "supreme blessedness." Sources in Wikipedia, fortunately, go back to the word's origins:

In Latin, it derives from *beati*, meaning "happy, rich, blessed."

In Greek, it derives from *makarios*, meaning "happy, blessed."

Thankfully, my other textbooks and references agreed with Wikipedia.

But, the most important thing for us to understand is that this single word for this sense of happiness and **rich blessedness** in Hebrew provides a much deeper meaning, termed *chesed*, which is not a trait or characteristic for an individual. Instead, it is a **condition** found only **with God**: sublime **contentment** and total **communion with God**. That goes far beyond “happy.” I believe that this was **the intent of Jesus**. He was not only declaring what was, but creating the **new reality** in his declaring it. It is exactly the same when the umpire calls someone out in baseball. The statement produces the result, no matter what the individual player or the team expects or wants.

Furthermore, the people receiving these blessings and this **close relationship** with God were the most **undeserving** in society in Palestine. These frank statements are exactly **opposite** to **common wisdom**. They pronounce a rich and meaningful blessing on **authentic disciples** in the Christian community who are well known to the writer of *Matthew*.

They do not describe nine different kinds of good people who get to go to heaven, but are nine declarations about the blessedness *they receive, which is* contrary to all *expectations concerning these individuals who are* living in **anticipation** of God’s reign.

New Interpreters Bible, (writer’s **bold** and *italics*).

Of course, we may hear all of this and decide that we must **re-form our lives** and take these words as properties of a more holy life “well lived.” I will tell you that this was not the intent of Jesus at all. In fact, these are **not characteristics** to imitate. So, understand that no one is required to give away all your possessions, your clothes, your retirement, or sell your car and home. And, we do not need to live in a commune in a desert to await the second coming of Christ or an apocalypse. That is not the intent of this sermon from Jesus.

Instead, Jesus intentionally is upsetting the proverbial apple cart and grabbing the attention of the **affluent** (rich merchants and tax collectors), the **politically connected** (the ruling class and Sadducees), the **Greeks** described as pagans (the Hellenists), those who overemphasize **the law** while ignoring God’s call for mercy (the Pharisees), and those who **enforce the law** and dissect it beyond meaning (the scribes).

Instead, Jesus is supporting the downtrodden, the **outcast**, the unclean lepers, those starving, those too poor to worship at the temple, those who work 14 hour days and 7 days a week and are too exhausted and too poor to keep all of the Laws of Moses, and those living in the wilderness without shelter. These are the people who are deserving of the **kingdom of God**. They receive this **Good News** in its purest, most meaningful form: a **blessing** from God. And, they receive it **ahead** of all the rest. And, yes, like the songs I mentioned earlier, those receiving this blessing will be happy, indeed. But, this is not the joy of satisfaction of being well fed, richly clothed, warm in winter, or cool in summer. They are blessed and in **communion** with God. They are the **first** to receive this portion of the **kingdom of God**. This is the “new normal” that is Christ and **God’s reign** through the Holy Spirit.

My sister has been a devoted “church lady” for a very long time, working on the staff of her congregation as its music director for over 35 years. She often reminds me,

“Stan, you are probably the only person in the worship space who has any training in theology. Only the retired pastors have been to seminary. Be sure to use plain language and make the sermon as simple as possible.”

That is pretty good advice from a real professional in our Presbyterian “world.” But, try as I did today I likely have not succeeded in her recommendations.

Regardless, as we conclude this time together I will draw your attention away from my sermon and back to the passages of scripture in *Isaiah*. When we read these verses, we realize that **mercy and justice** were not new concepts for Jesus or for any of the Hebrew faithful: They knew this deeper meaning of this scripture reading along with many more. But, with the opening of the **ministry of Jesus** things truly kick into “another gear.” Long awaited events that seemed so far away and unobtainable were **now at hand**. Jesus described and outlined the **kingdom of God** which arrived with him. We have to remind ourselves that this not complete, and that we must continually remind ourselves of these difficult lessons from Jesus. With some patience on your part and lots of **prayer and study** on mine, in the coming Sundays in worship we will explore what really is “behind” the Beatitudes, finding more about their full measure and depth in a series of four sermons.

These verses from the **Sermon on the Mount** are at the very beginning of the *Gospel of Matthew*, and they are the **foundation** for all that Jesus is about to do throughout the Gospel story. It is worth my time and yours, to dig a little deeper, and to see what **God’s Word** will open for us this day and **well beyond**.

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