

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
6th Sunday after Pentecost
July 21, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Habakkuk 2:1-4

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Matthew 5:1-5 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.”

An Attitude on Beatitudes

If you were with us in worship last week, we outlined the setting for the **Sermon on the Mount** and the special portion of it which we know as **the Beatitudes**. We did some clarification on the **intent** of Jesus in giving these particular pronouncements: Instead of describing favorable traits for those gathered to hear Jesus, and for all of us who believe in Christ, Jesus is declaring that these particular persons are not only **blessed by God**, but in deep joy **in communion** with God.

Like salvation itself, this joy or selfless sense of **unity with God** is created and given by God. It is not something that you and I create for ourselves, nor can we earn it by taking on these particular traits or settings. Making ourselves impoverished will not produce the deep sense of **abiding with**, and belonging to, **God** which was intended by Jesus in these Beatitudes. Instead, those who already are impoverished, along with the downtrodden and the poorest of the poor, were receiving this Jewish sense of *chesed* (a Hebrew word) which means: happiness, deep and profound joy, blessed communion with God. If we wanted to procure this for ourselves in a big demonstration, I guess we could have a rally and start a chant, something like:

“I’ve got *chesed*; You’ve got *chesed*; Go, Team, Go!”

Of course, that is not the kindest, or even most appropriate, manner to depict this topic, but it is not that far from the **hype** that many church leaders push onto worshipers each Sunday. Instead of pumping ourselves up to bring us to God’s attention, Jesus proclaimed then, and now, that the **blessing of God** has been brought to those who **fail to receive any notice** from the remainder of society. Jesus can do this, because he has brought the **kingdom of God** to humankind.

So, **who** are these persons described by Jesus; and, **why** are they described here in this particular way? You may notice as you read beyond our scripture selection today, that these particular persons described by Jesus are in **groups of three**. Today, we will deal with the first three in *Matthew 5*

- Those **poor in spirit**- dejected, downcast, missing hope or a future: They obtain the kingdom of heaven! **Nothing is withheld** from them.
- Those who **mourn**, who are sad, who are grieving: They will be **comforted**, placed at ease, consoled, rightly **changed** by God.
- Those seeking **righteousness**: Those who truly are seeking, longing to be with God. And, they **hunger and thirst** for righteousness. This is not the typical way that we think of salvation, is it? But, Jesus tells us succinctly that they will be satisfied.

So, this morning we will spend some time looking in more detail at each of these initial three, because they are the particular persons in the world of Jesus who not only are **seeking God**, but they are the ones who are **chosen** by God.

Those Poor in Spirit

Many of us can identify with feeling **dejected** and being sad, especially after a **severe loss** or the death of a loved one. But, we need to consider that there are many today who have never been through **personal suffering**: Our children, nephews, nieces, and grandchildren did not **sacrifice** for World War II or live in want for a decade or more during the Great Depression. They will not identify with being “down and out” in the same way that the Greatest Generation can and continues to do.

But, we consider must consider most of us never reach the nadir of existence: the **lowest point** possible for our lives. Who among us today has lost everything financially? Who has been **rejected** for employment for their **entire life**? Who has **never owned** a piece of property: a home, a car, or even a watch? Who has been **bypassed** in our education system because of **poor performance**? Even more regrettable are those who performed poorly through no fault of their own. Many of the **underlying conditions** affecting these individuals now can be **identified** and are treatable: autism spectrum disorder, short attention spans, hyperactivity, or more commonly enduring an early childhood without items to read at home and with caretakers who are **barely literate** themselves.

These become the **downtrodden**, and there is a high likelihood of a poor outcome **socially and economically** for nearly all of them. But, what if these conditions we just described involved the **neighborhood** where we live, or if we **lacked** the necessary language skills, or if we were judged by the **color of our skin**? Despite all of these shortcomings, in our scripture lesson **Jesus proclaims** that these are **blessed** by God and are joyful: at **peace** and in unity **with God**.

Those Who Mourn

Perhaps, it is easier for us to discuss **death and dying** in this setting of faith and worship. Certainly, most of us have experienced this type of loss in our personal lives. Fortunately, there is a great deal of literature, good and bad, that attempt to deal with this. The better ones are “**When Bad Things Happen to Good People**,” by Rabbi Harold Kushner. Another is “**Tuesdays with Morrie**,” by Mitch Albom. Through writings like these, that deal with reality and the very human reaction to **living and dying**, we gain **perspective** on the inevitability of our time here on earth, or “this side of heaven,” if you wish.

Most of you would agree that **the Bible** is filled with death and tragedy. Indeed, even Jesus could not escape this final aspect of human existence. But, in this sense of **chesed**, Jesus says that these individuals, sad and confused, are **blessed by God**. They feel the pain of loss, but **God remains** with them: an **abiding presence**. In this sense, those who mourn are supported and maintained by God. Through all the anger and lament, openly present in the *Psalms* and in *Lamentations*, the writer maintains faith in God. And, God maintains faith in those who seek the love and mercy of Almighty God.

Those Seeking Righteousness

Jesus uses these terms of extreme conditions of **hunger and thirst** and associates them directly with **righteousness**. This type of language introduces other scriptures which center on this visceral aspect of faith and seeking:

Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

John 6:32-35 NRSV

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Revelation 7:16-17

In our **Reformed tradition**, seeking righteousness is not life in a convent or an abby. It each of us living for others: striving to do our best at all times. It is **serving God** in ministry to the best of our ability and capacity. It is **giving and sharing** of our resources: not only financial, but with our time and with our particular gifts and talents. But, we must realize that many others are seeking righteousness, as well: those who “fly under our radar.” These include: the **narcotic addict** failing and sometimes succeeding in staying clean and sober and the **working alcoholic** who isolates themselves from co-workers, friends, family, and all too often their own faith.

Some of you are aware of practical approaches to such problems and can recall the methods used by the highly successful self-help programs, **Narcotics Anonymous** (NA) and **Alcoholic Anonymous** (AA). They base their system of support on one another, but also in the help which comes only from a “Higher Power.” For those who believe, this is God and God alone. And, **we know God** best through Jesus, the **Risen Christ**. According to Jesus, everyone may seek righteousness. And, it is **God’s good will** for humankind that makes the intentional seeker truly blessed and whole. This is the sense of *chesed*: being **one with God**.

When we become **disciples of Christ**, fully engaged with God, we faithfully approach our lives and **our living** through the continual filter of **Christ Jesus**, and him crucified, as Paul proclaims (1 Cor 1:23). This means that we are talking about the **resurrected Christ**, who ascended to God and reigns with God. In this sense, Christ certainly is a powerful **agent of change** and a blessing for many. And, this includes those who **cannot get a break**, who cannot pull themselves out of the hole of **grief**, and those who look to God for justice and **mercy**.

Next week, we will engage with the next three portions of the **Beatitudes**. If you want a **homework** assignment, read ahead and locate a **commentary** or a good **study Bible**. We have a ways to go, and you and I both need to be fully prepared. And so, I recommend spending some time engaged with this entire Chapter 5 in *Matthew*. We do not have time to take it up as a whole, but it provides a unique outline of the Christian life and a new life **in Christ**.

As we discussed last week, **the Beatitudes** are not a prescription to holiness. In fact, in these verses Jesus is telling us that we need an all **new attitude**. We cannot pray our way into heaven, and we cannot perform sufficient “kind works” in order to gain sufficient favor with God to bring our salvation. Instead, these verses in the **Sermon on the Mount** force us into a new perspective, a new attitude toward **those who surround us**. The poor, those in deep remorse and grief, those who seek **righteousness** for the sake of God and not themselves: These are the ones who receive the **sacred blessing from God**, this sense of *chesed*. The most pious public figures, the most conscientious adherents to the Ten Commandments, those seeking their own recognition, are all bypassed by God in this early phase of the **Gospel** story.

These verses reinforce that God holds the key to **new life** and the abundant goodness that we know **in Christ**. And, **God chooses** to give this blessing: this sense of deep, abiding **grace** to those who are not included in the upper reaches of society, totally bypassing those who seem the most pious and religious.

In the **Beatitudes**, Jesus told his followers, and continues to tell us today, that **God knows** what is in our hearts. God knows what is **right**. And, God sent **his Son Jesus** to us to demonstrate throughout his time on Earth these truths. Jesus is enacting the insights of the prophet Micah:

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God?”

Micah 6:8 NRSV

