

**Sermon**  
**McCarter Presbyterian Church**  
**8th Sunday after Pentecost**  
August 4, 2019

**Old Testament Lesson**

Isaiah 60:1-3

**NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon**

Matthew 5:3-16

“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.

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

**The Beatitudes: Expectations**

Today is the last of four sermons that take in **the Beatitudes**, the key portion of the **Sermon on the Mount** by Jesus to a group of followers on an elevated place, or mountain, in Galilee. The heart of this series of sermons are these verses known as the Beatitudes, which are based on the first word in each phrase, meaning **blessed**. We noted that this sense of blessedness was profound: that is, quite deep. Jesus is conveying the Jewish sense of *chesed*, ultimate joy and **communion with God**. Sadly, the superficial impression often derived from these verses is that Jesus is describing worthy traits or lifestyles for **holiness**. But, his words describe something far different from that. He announces that the **kingdom of God** is specifically meant for these folks whom he identifies who are forgotten or ignored in both Jewish and Roman society during the time of Jesus.

But, these attitudes toward those who are **less affluent** and **less educated** and outside the mainstream of life are remarkably similar to the attitudes in **society today**. From that, we can see that God has reached out to these categories of persons who are, well, less fortunate. In doing this, God totally **bypassed** those who thought they were doing **everything right** in order to stay on the “good side” of God. The scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the ruling elite all thought that they were worthy for first consideration by God. Among the the Romans and the wealthier Greek merchants, these same people named by Jesus were among the lowest of the low.

So, it is these specific persons outside of that “upper crust” who, amazingly, get the attention of God and God’s Son Jesus. These include:

- **Those Poor in Spirit:** These are the “down and out,” who seem to have everything stacked against them.
- **Those Who Mourn:** In the midst of **sadness and pain**, God blesses the people who seem to have lost so much, such as a lifelong companion or friend. Without much effort, we could include those who have other forms of **loss**: their farm, a home, or the source of income as a laborer or craftsman. God is with them, and God has **never left** them. God has reserved a special place for them in **God’s kingdom** as part of God’s love and concern for them.
- **The Meek:** These are the folks who live in the shadows, who have “no stake in the game,” as we say. They are alone **without support**, and no one to guard or protect them, except God. This could be any number of oppressed people, such as slaves and servants. But, it would include two of the lowest groups in Jewish society: **women and children**. God remembers them and seeks to preserve their **welfare** and peace of mind, even if they are “Nobodies” to the rest of the world.
- **Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness:** These are persons who truly seek **communion** with God. Some set aside their lives entirely anticipating the moment when God will grant them **peace**. Last week we mentioned **Anna and Simeon** who were waiting every day at the temple to get a glimpse of the Messiah (*Luke 2:22-38*). God presented the infant Jesus to them and **rewarded them** for their long vigil. This event was not a result of the individual efforts of Simeon and Anna. Instead, it was **God’s desire** to grant them mercy and insight into **God’s will**. They learned of **God’s truth** for them and all humankind.
- **The Merciful:** These are the people who are **preserving relationships**, who hold no grudge, who are kind, who treat others as they would like to be treated. They love their enemies and hold to what is good. **God sees them** and takes care of them.
- **The Pure in Heart:** Some folks really are **saints**. God sees this and chooses to bless them in this profound manner of the Jewish sense of *chesed*. We must understand that they have **not earned** favor with God. Instead, their makeup, their sincerity, and the true substance of who they are places them before others: They are uncompromising, faithful people who see the best in others and **hold no malice** at all. They are **blessed** by God.

- **The Peacemakers:** These are the special people who strive for equality, who seek compromise instead of confrontation, who **choose the good** and model it for others, so that middle ground can be found, claimed, and expanded. Often this is **thankless** and the peacemakers are criticized by nearly everyone. But, God knows that this is their form of **ministry**. God offers them blessing as the **kingdom of God** will come to them, not to warring kings and emperors.

Now, I have had several weeks to prepare for this final sermon. During all that time, one image that kept coming back was the actual location and setting where this **Sermon on the Mount** might have taken place. I had some insights which centered on the phrase, “the peacemakers,” and of all things the Monty Python movie, “**The Life of Brian**,” kept coming to mind. This movie likely passed by many of you during its run in theaters in 1979, but it lives on in video clips and on digital media. These comedians and actors put together a rowdy the life of Jesus, and at the time it was criticized as being blasphemous and too negative about Christ and religion in general. However, over time critics noted that through their filming on location in North Africa the **Monty Python** troupe thoroughly captured the details of the terrain, clothing, and poverty of the people in **Palestine** 2000 years ago. The result is that the British comedians made this film into one of the more **authentic** movies about the life and times of Jesus and his disciples.

During a scene that depicted the Sermon on the Mount, people who were far away from Jesus likely had a difficult time hearing him. To make a point of this, the Monty Python players took roles in costume as bystanders listening to the sermon from Jesus. They tried to make sense of the words they hardly could hear. One of their versions of the words of Jesus becomes, “Blessed are the **cheesemakers**.” Someone says that this is a bit odd. Another more affluent bystander tells his wife not to take the term literally, as all enterprises involving dairy products deserve the **blessing of God**. Then, an argument breaks out among the onlookers, and the Roman soldiers standing around the crowd have to break up the fight. The remainder of the movie continues with the central figure, Brian, doing the best he can, but always winding up near the ministry of Jesus, which produces definite complications on his life, resulting in his own untimely death.

This story is relevant for us today, because it helps us inform us of the same thing that the comedians of Monty Python Players realized and intentionally created: That common, living people **surrounded Jesus**, and that the somewhat static scenes depicted in the Gospels involved flesh and blood people with lives, choices, events, and feelings. Even though these persons were **changed** by their encounter with the **ministry of Jesus**, these new believers continued their ordinary lives, but they now were living in new and different ways. That involvement with Jesus altered who and what they were, **evolving** into persons who were very different from the time before encountering Jesus.

This is where this last portion of the **Beatitudes** and the **Sermon on the Mount** demonstrates the **power of God** and the profound, direct influence of Jesus and his ministry on the lives of the people of Palestine. It enveloped them and **changed them**. And, now these same words and power involve and **affect you and me**. These words and statements were very hard to ignore for those surrounding Jesus, whether they could hear his words clearly or not. But, the *Gospel of Matthew* shows us that the Sermon on the Mount impacted and changed those who heard it. These scriptures continue to impact us, because the Gospels contain the written word; and it is **God's Word**: Jesus, who was and remains **the Christ** (*John* 1:1-18 and *1 John* 1:1-4).

As you heard in the reading this morning, the **Beatitudes** end with two categories of people. It is interesting that both of these are situations that develop from an individual's **faith**. With this, Jesus tells us about something new. In this last section, he moved away from the social positions, particular life situations, and characteristics of individuals. He had proclaimed that they were **blessed** now by God in the revealing of **God's kingdom** to them. Now, these two new areas of focus are bringing into view the **future effects** of his ministry, Jesus described persons who **believe** in God and who have made distinct **choices** because of **their faith** in God and in Jesus.

### **Those Persecuted for the Sake of Righteousness**

Those who choose to be faithful and righteous **believe in God** and continue with purpose in their living. But, now Jesus says that they are **persecuted** for these choices. If they truly **believe in Jesus**, then they have little choice in their newly found life **in Christ**. Because they have been **transformed**, they are new creations altogether. Truly, because of this new aspect of living, they cannot help themselves. Jesus says that this is predictable, and that rather than being discouraged, they will be **blessed**.

Today, we know that as the church grew, not everyone accepted them. Last week, we talked about potential conflicts among new **Jewish and Gentile Christians**, who likely were opposed by the Jewish faithful and the local authorities. Regardless, Jesus tells them that they have the **kingdom of heaven**. Those in society are "kicking them to the curb," almost literally, but they are **known to God**, and they **know God** in the truest, deepest way, as well. This is the **new reality** that today we might call a "New Normal." Having found Christ, **God remains** in their lives, **never departing** from them.

### **Those Falsely Accused**

Jesus tells another group of people that they are going to have a **hard time**: all the time and everywhere. And yet, they must know that the **kingdom of heaven is theirs**. They are known to God and **God remains faithful** to them. In many ways, this reflects the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures and the way that they were treated by the people and the rulers of Israel and Judah. Jesus tells us plainly that life lived **in Christ**, of and for God, is pretty tough. There is no rest or relaxation for believers. **Life is tough** with God, but it is right, just, and within the framework that God has created and **ordained** for us all.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses **the Beatitudes** to provide insights into the **nature of God** and the true meaning of the **kingdom**. As we take in these truths and experience this sense of blessedness, this *chesed*, you and I are **changed**. And, with that change come **expectations**.

As he closes this portion of the sermon, Jesus tells us that these important findings are **true and good**. Not only that, they are now **within us**. He uses salt as a metaphor for belief and living this new life. Like **salt**, you can only be what you are. If the salt no longer has the property of salt, then it is of **no use** as salt. Indeed, it no longer **is** salt. But, in Christ we take on a **change** that affects others. Like the preservation of food and life itself, salt had **great value** in that time and still does today. Once in place, salt works to **extend life and health**. Our belief in God and Christ is very much the same for us **spiritually** and foundationally. Life is never the same, permanently **transformed** through our experience of God in **Jesus Christ**.

And lastly, Jesus tells us that we are something **powerful** and remarkable. We are not like a light: We **ARE** light. “You are the light of the world.” (*Matt. 5:14b*) Furthermore, light is so powerful that it is nearly **impossible to hide** it. Human beings can see a candle burning from miles away. How much brighter does our **light shine** as believers in God through **Jesus Christ**? Jesus is telling us that **others will see** who and what we are, and they **will notice**. And, like the light shining in the distant darkness, they will remember the feeling of discovery and **delight** on finding that **light of God** which **burns within us**.

With these final words, Jesus proclaims that taking up the cause of his ministry is made easier by God because of the **teachings of Christ**, the example of **God’s love** in Christ, and the continuing **support** God provides us. In addition, we further strengthen our faith and deepen our **understanding of God** through discussion, prayer, study, and worship. All of this is made possible because God brought to us the **kingdom of heaven**. The Beatitudes inform us that this process has nothing to do with keeping track of our **good behavior** each day, or counting on our good deeds to gain favor with God. Since the time of Paul, we know that we **cannot earn** our way into God’s acceptance. Instead, you and I receive **a gift** from God; and, we do our best to follow what God has **ordained** for us.

For some of us, it is an active **prayer life**. For others it is offering a **kind word** of support and encouragement. For others, it is faithfully **maintaining** the worship space or the grounds around the church campus. And, for others of greater means, it is sharing of their **resources** in generous and profound ways to support the mission and ministry of the **church called by Christ**.

In **the Beatitudes**, Jesus spells out these key elements of the **kingdom of God**: He offers **expectations** to us that center on **transformation**, love, **kindness**, and the blessing of Almighty God. Unlike the false **prescriptions for salvation** that surround us today, Jesus offers no time limits, no promotions, no categories of greatness, and no “wish list” to fulfill. Instead, we have the **Word of God** in Jesus Christ. And, Jesus shared the heart of the Gospel early in his ministry through these **Beatitudes**. It became **foundational** to the lives of the disciples and the hundreds, even thousands, that followed Jesus through Galilee, Samaria, and into Jerusalem.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus is giving us an outline of God's depth, **power**, and peace through **God's blessing**, which allows each of us to relate to God and Christ in a way that fits into our lives, **our choices**, our time, and the **daily expression** of who and what we are. The expectation of God is that Christ and **God's mercy** are **sufficient** for any one of us, no matter how **humbly** we live, how low we feel, how removed we are from power and influence. **We belong to God**, and we are all key parts of **God's kingdom**.

Thanks be to God for the gift of this deep and barely imaginable **blessing** which we receive through the **grace** that we know in God's Son, **Jesus Christ**.

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