

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
7th Sunday after Pentecost
July 28, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Psalm 111

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Matthew 5:1-9 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.

Special Cases: The Beatitudes

Jesus has gathered together a group of people on a mountain in Galilee. He addressed them in a major sermon. It also appears in the *Gospel of Luke* in a slightly altered form. But, here in *Matthew* Jesus is proclaiming that things have **changed**. And, they have changed for **the good**. But, the message is **disturbing** to the more affluent, the more powerful, and the politically connected who likely are among those listening to him. They have this reaction because Jesus states that **God** is bringing joy, **comfort**, and profound **peace** to **everyone**- except them! Later in this Gospel, and in the other three, we will hear responses from those whom Jesus is rubbing the wrong way. But, here in this fifth chapter in *Matthew*, they are silent. And, if you read past **the Beatitudes** you will see that Jesus does not stop there. He goes on to describe how his believers, his followers, will **impact** the entire world. He also describes the underlying nature of those who God offers hope, support, peace, and ultimate joy. It is **unexpected news** for all concerned.

Jesus begins by addressing the **lowest in society**, those who are downtrodden and will never rise “above their station,” as we used to hear. Hear they are:

- **Poor in Spirit**: these are the **downtrodden**, and there is a high likelihood of a poor outcome **socially and economically** for nearly all of them. Jesus says that God sees them, knows them, upholds them, **blesses them**, brings them closer to the almighty wonder of God through **God’s grace** and mercy. This was not the expected outcome for these “down-and-out” people. Sadly, little has changed, because that is the view we hold now. How can the very poor, the needy, the disenfranchised be **worthy** of all of this? What have they done to deserve it? Jesus says that simply **being who they are** makes them worthy, because God deems it so. The kingdom has come. Clearly, this is both **disruptive** and unexpected.

- **Those Who Mourn:** Last week, we noted that the *Bible* is filled with death and tragedy. Indeed, even Jesus could not escape this final aspect of his **human existence**. But, in this sense of *chesed*, this Hebrew word that expresses ultimate blessing and joy **in communion** with God, Jesus says that these individuals are **blessed by God** even in the midst of profound sadness and confusion. They feel the pain of loss, but **God remains** with them as an **abiding presence**. In this sense, those who **mourn** are supported and maintained by God. Through all the anger and regret of loss, the writer of *Matthew* maintains that **faith in God** is enough. And, God maintains faith, foundational love, and mercy with them.
- **The Meek:** These are those **without position** in society. Like my ancestors who spent decades scratching out a living in the red clay in Sandy Flats near us in Travelers Rest, there is **nothing special** about the meek. Like my forebears, they have no representation. That is, no one looks out for their interests or needs. Quite simply, they are **unknowns**: nobodies. The meek are those **without position** in society. They possess no means to defend themselves. In the time of Jesus and his ministry, this category included slaves and **peasants** and servants, along with nearly all of the **Twelve Disciples**. We can see that this covers a broad category of people and goes far beyond our sense of mild-mannered “weaklings,” which springs to mind for us. And, today this word is even broader in meaning, incorporating someone’s spirit, personality, and physical strength. Jesus says that **God** will take care of them. It doesn’t mean that they receive the benefits of a life coach, assertiveness training, or a private fitness instructor. No, Jesus says that they receive **God’s blessing**: God provides for them, **sustains** them, nourishes them. God **defends** them. This is possible, because God **deems** it so. Jesus proclaimed it. And, the world would soon live it this, witnessing Christ’s ministry, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension to be with God “on high.”
- **Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness:** Last week, we spent some time on people in this area. These are people sincerely seeking **a relationship** with God. Perhaps they were increasingly active in their **synagogue** and praying in earnest. If we look just beyond the birth narrative of Jesus in *Luke*, we find two such people: **Anna and Simeon**, who both recognize that the infant before them in the temple is someone very special (*Luke* 2:22-38). Brought by his faithful parents for dedication, Anna and Simeon recognize that the **infant Jesus** before them is the Chosen One, the **Messiah**. They have waited all their lives for this moment. **God heard them**, and they are fully aware of this **living blessing** which has come into their lives. This is a reward that few obtained. But, it was **God’s good pleasure** that led to that moment.

And, now we come to some new material. (I believe I can hear some of you sayin, “At last!”)

The Merciful

Showing mercy has **two meanings** for us today. One is the **holdover** from chivalry, a noble sense of charity toward a **vanquished foe** or for someone who cannot defend themselves. But, in the highly competitive spirit of corporate America, this ties back to our discussion of the **Meek** we just completed. These folks are not “strong,” or they are considered lacking in a quality so that they are **not competitive**. Certainly, they would be overlooked in a work setting and socially, as well. Beyond that, we also know the term **mercy** in a religious context today: People may show mercy as agents of **God’s love and kindness**, sparing others and giving of themselves for **the good** of others. Unfortunately, that is not popular in our culture. Instead, we carry things to extremes: We have failed policies that make bad situations worse: One of these is placing immature and vulnerable **adolescents** in confinement with hardened and unrepentant criminals, fostering another generation scarred by altered and desperate living that will return to **criminal** behavior and to the courts and jail. Several states and the U.S. Congress are reviewing this, thankfully. We should hope and pray for change. And, if so moved we should do even more.

Another trend today is that we **harden our hearts** with vicious verbal attacks against our opponents from all sides: seeding and promoting visceral anger and resentment. Nearly all mental and social professionals see this as a crisis in our society, producing tensions and **hardened views** that can lead to open **prejudice** and violence. But, in his ministry Jesus demonstrated that we are to be **something else** entirely: We are to be **caring** and kind. He reinforced this with the familiar parable of the dreaded “heathen” Samaritan who picked up, and cared for, an injured man: This detested person, the Samaritan, showed mercy while those tied to the practice of worship at the temple, a Jewish priest and a Levite, failed to take any action at all (*Luke 10:25-37*). The Samaritan, the one **outside** of the Jewish faith, showed **mercy**.

In this statement in **the Beatitudes**, Jesus tells us that this activity of mercy is **God at work**. It is the **kingdom** come. It is the **heart of the Gospel**.

The Pure in Heart

Well, I guess we all have someone that we know that was good enough to be called a “saint.” These persons are often selfless, unpretentious, polite, and consistently kind. I would put, the **Rev. Fred Rogers** in this category. Ordained to special ministry as a **second-career pastor**, Fred Rogers created a children’s broadcast ministry that is now regarded as both heartfelt and **deeply meaningful** for an entire generation of adults and now their children. A new generation can learn of **Mr. Rogers** from books, articles, and movies about him.

As best as we can tell, the **Mr. Rogers** of Public Television was pretty much the “real deal.” I would compare him to another compassionate and remarkable pastor from earlier in the 20th century: **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**. There was **no malice** in either of them. They both told others that they were **far from perfect**: But, they wanted a **safer world** for those who could not fend for themselves: Bonhoeffer died at the hands of the Nazi

regime in Germany because of his faith, his choices, and his actions. Fred Rogers was criticized and found wanting by the press during his active years, but he spent a lifetime devoting his **love**, his care, and his purity of heart toward **children**. His ministry was one of tender goodness a profound **love of God** in Jesus Christ.

In blessing the **Pure in Heart**, Jesus tells us that God appreciates the efforts, the **caring**, the depth of **love** of individuals who are pure in heart. I suppose this would include your favorite aunt or your cousin that became a priest or nun. But, I really believe that Jesus places this **special category** of human beings before God not for recognition, but for the **contentment and love** that they provide to **others** through their ministry of **everyday living**.

The Peacemakers

We should consider this in full. Is this a career path or a description of Social Awareness and a work toward unity and harmony? Well, in order to deal with this, we have to “shift gears” just a bit. This falls into a category that is not part of our community today. There is a pacifist group here in the United States that used these verses for their name: the Peacemakers. However, there is no record of a group or career path in Biblical times that fits this category. I wondered if there was a peacemaker in Jewish life and culture, sort of like the **matchmaker** for dating and marriage. (If you have seen “Fiddler on the Roof,” the matchmaking is one of the themes in the relationships among the young people and their parents in the small village of Russian Jews at the heart of the story.)

But, that is speculation at best. However, in the time of this **Sermon on the Mount** there were Jews who **refused to serve** in the military. And, many **Jewish Christians** also refused to serve. Perhaps, they were considered **peacemakers**? In addition, the caesars, or **Roman emperors** often referred to themselves as peacemakers, because through military might they brought peace to the countries that they controlled in the Roman empire. That is, all warring ceased because of the might of Roman rule.

But, some of my sources noted that there were disagreements among the various **Christian communities** for a hundred years or more after the start of the church. Perhaps, the *Gospel of Matthew* was written specifically for a given community, which did its best to **unite** these differing groups in matters of religion? At the time, there were all manner of **conflicts**: the traditional Jewish faithful v. the new Christians, Jewish Christians v. Gentile Christians, Jerusalem Christians of Peter and James v. those of Barnabas or Paul. We will never know, but it seems that the writer of *Matthew* had some individuals, or a category of folks, in mind for this special mention in these verses spoken by Jesus. If nothing else, these words should stimulate each of us to consider the ways that we might promote peace, **cooperation**, unity, and forms of **compromise** among opposing groups in matters of faith, in local elections, in community development, and among individuals who are friends and strangers.

In that light, what could you and I do in **our communities**, among our friends to **facilitate** a less divisive means of addressing one another, withholding name-calling, or showing a bit of **grace** for our opposition as well as our neighbor.? Now, we can see that this is a special case: Not a career choice, but **a way of living**. Something that falls closer to a life **in Christ** with compassion and trust built on **love of humankind**. The remarkable thing with this shift in thinking, is that it takes farther and farther away from **hate**, revenge, **extreme nationalism**, and confrontation that seem to consume so many today. Jesus says that they will become the children of God. Like the covenant of God with Israel, the peacemakers will be part of the inner circle with God: **blessed** and content beyond imagining.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus brings up some special cases of life and **living** that beg our attention. This continues today, exposing special situations: cases that require additional attention from us. These aspects of our **human existence** deserve our full attention, because all of it concerned Jesus enough that he deliberately made these **pronouncements** about them. As the old gospel tune proclaimed, “If it was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me.” That includes humility, **withholding judgement**, considered and compassionate understanding, and stopping long enough to **listen** and to respond with **kindness**. Doing so will **diminish hate** and promote a calmer environment that can support **open discussion**. It will stem our anger and provide **peace and rest**. It will disarm the strong-armed and the strong-willed and promote the **goodness** within each one of us.

The source for this is not Pastor Stan. Nor, is it another pastor down the street. The source is Jesus Christ, the **Word of God**. And, that is the role of **sound preaching**: to take what is in **scripture** and draw it out for the good that it can do and the **effect** that it can have on each one of us: in our choices, in our thinking, and in our relationships with one another and **the stranger**. Sometimes, this goes against a lifetime of tradition, both personal and social as well as our religious upbringing. For too long, we made Jesus into an image of our own making with skewed personality traits, such as: detachment, being highly **reserved**, acting holier than all the rest, retiring, **meek**, and timid. However, the record that he left behind shows a bit more fire: a zest for **living** and a heavenly gift for **kindness**, which mixed with a sharp tongue and a **quick wit**. This is the more **human side** of Jesus, and I believe that these particular verses show that Jesus identified with the **everyday people**. And, the writer of *Matthew* takes care to convey this to us and offers a hint about the **undercurrents** that swirled through, and affected, the loosely organized **communities** of Christians in those first decades after the death and resurrection of Christ.

In **the Beatitudes**, Jesus wants you and me to understand that living is **not a contest** for the most blessed among us or our particular denomination or congregation. A life **in Christ** is not a trial of endurance of suffering that brings us **salvation**. It is not a battle of wills or of political ideologies or political parties. It is an awareness of our own **limitations**. It is a **binding together** of each of us to one another, even with those with whom we are at odds or with whom we vigorously **disagree**.

In these verses, Jesus identifies particular **individuals** who are worthy of **God's blessing** and communion with God. They are hardly the folks that we would find today at our tall steeple churches or among the leaders of a congregation. They are not on the Board of Visitors of your favorite school, and their children probably do not travel in a late model minivan with very busy parents seeking the next sporting event or appointment for their overly engaged children. Like the peacemakers, they are people who either **escape attention** altogether, or who are derided and ridiculed for who and what they are, and the views for which they stand.

Jesus is telling us that we are **not the judges** for them or for anyone else. That is a role for **God alone**. Our job is to show kindness and to **love impartially**, even when it hurts to do that very thing. If we are living in Christ, these aspects become **second nature**. We do not have to think about what to do. We look to God and perform **our ministry**. We need look no further than Triune Mercy Center here in Greenville, or a video of Fred Rogers, to see this type of life: a life in Christ. That is, a life in action with loving kindness.

Where are you and I in this portion of **God's judgement**? Where do we see the **kingdom of God**? What **choices** do we make? And, how often do we look to God, the guidance and **life of Christ**, and the continuing love and support of **God's Spirit**?

Jesus doesn't state this, but I believe it summarizes this portion of **the Beatitudes**: Is our faith based on strict **obedience** of laws and rules? Or, do we dare to have **a faith** that is like **Christ**: founded, grounded, and lived out each day in love and charity, extending a **helping hand** to whoever is in need?

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