

Sermon: The Beatitudes**Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 29, 2016**

The Gospel writer, Matthew, wrote his account of Jesus' life in such a way that it mirrored the story of ancient Israel. This wasn't just a literary technique because the early followers of Jesus were profoundly struck by how Jesus was not just another Jewish prophetic figure but that in and through him somehow all of Israel's history was being gathered up, recapitulated and finally fulfilled.

So Matthew spends a good part of the beginning of his Gospel with an account of Jesus' genealogy going all the way back to Abraham "who was the father of Isaac who was the father of Jacob who was the father of Judah" and so on... the huge list of his forebears anchoring Jesus clearly firmly in the lineage of Israel. Then just as Joseph with his multi-colored coat and his brothers of the Old Testament find themselves in Egypt, so we meet in Matthew's Gospel another Joseph, namely Jesus' earthly father, who soon after the birth takes his family to Egypt to escape the persecutions of Herod. And while the Israelites were liberated by Moses through the waters of the Red Sea, so too then does Jesus emerge into his public ministry through the waters of the Jordan River and, like the Israelites spending 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus is driven into the desert for 40 days. And just as Moses gathered the people of Israel into 12 tribes, so too, as we read last week, does Jesus gather his 12 disciples together – reflecting those 12 tribes. And then where we find ourselves today in the 5th chapter of Matthew's Gospel,

just as Moses went up to the mountain of Mt. Sinai to receive the 10 commandment, the fundamental teaching for how the people of Israel were to live together in the years and generations to come, so too did Jesus go up on top of the mountain and he shares with his disciples the his Sermon on the Mount which begins with the 8 beatitudes, the fundamental teaching for how the disciples are to live together in the years to come and disciples of Jesus in generations to follow.

It's a recapitulation of the story of Israel but Jesus fulfills the story and takes it a cut deeper as he reveals not just the laws that God expects his people to follow but the heart which God expects his people to have, a heart for him, a heart for the poor, a heart of mercy, a heart that mourns for the sorrows of the world, a heart that yearns for righteousness. They make a strange and striking list, the beatitudes do, a direct and unapologetic 180° reversal of all the ways their culture defined blessedness.... And I should add, no less a reversal of values than in our culture in 21st century America.

Blessed are the poor, the meek, the mourners, the pure in heart, the persecuted instead of blessed are the rich, the powerful and famous, the content and happy, the highly educated and crafty, to mention just a few. It's interesting, isn't it, how there are Christians who make a stink about having the 10 commandments in the public square, but for some reason, none of them argue for have the 8 beatitudes in the public square. That's the one – and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount – that as Christians we should keep in front of our faces – “you've heard it said an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, but I say turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give them your cloak and do not refuse anyone who begs

from you.” And then let’s discuss in the public square whether walls should be built and refugees turned back.

Jesus pronounces the meek and the poor and the mournful ones, blessed, not just deserving of our consideration and extra canned goods but blessed, consecrated, holy, sanctified by God. We often think of the poor, those who mourn, those who are meek, as those that we as strong wealthy faithful Christians are to help out from our place of greater blessedness, but this is a twist that we still can’t quite get our heads around. Jesus is calling them blessed of the divine, not them the unblessed that we the blessed should deign to help. And here’s why - because it’s often – not always – but often those who are impoverished, grief-stricken, or meek to the point of being taken advantage of, who have been driven to God with a faithfulness and reliance upon the grace of God that is often – not always but often – absent in those of us who have the privileges of a society and have made of our lives a success by all outward appearances.

In the church up in Vermont that I used to serve, I regularly visited a man who in the middle of his successful life began to have a serious alcohol problem which led to a significant car accident and was coupled by a stroke soon thereafter that left him half paralyzed, in chronic pain, and his family life in tatters. It was extremely slow and painful for him to walk at all but he insisted on walking and conversation due to his brain injury was sporadic and we spent a lot of our coffee time just in silence at a table with me occasionally making small talk or finding conversations to raise with him. I remember vividly his response to 2 questions I asked in those years of doing that

with him. “Rick, how do you make sense of God and your relationship with him in all this tragedy that has befallen you?” And without missing a beat, Rick said in his typically broken way “oh Will, God is the only reason I have anything! I owe my very breath to God. I would not be, without God and for that I am so grateful.” Another time I asked him – “what is your assessment Rick of what it’s all about, the purpose of this life?” And again, without a second thought he said “we are here to give praise to God!” As though I had asked him what 2 plus 2 was. Blessed are the broken, the meek, and those who mourn all that has been lost.

We have many ways to judge and decide upon the value and worth of a human being and I dare say that in our culture, like Jesus’ of 2000 years ago, Rick is not of much value or use by cultural standards and yet in God’s book, there’s a very different story that is written about Rick’s value and worth than the one we read and write ourselves.

And that seems to be the point of the beatitudes and Jesus’ whole Sermon on the Mount, that things look significantly different from God’s perspective. As Christians we believe that Jesus gave us this incredible opportunity to glimpse what the world looks like from that God-perspective and his Sermon on the Mount is down right shocking, even today, 2000 years later, in it’s perspective – “blessed are the meek (not the mighty and powerful) for they shall inherit the earth.” “Pray for - instead of hate and seek revenge upon - those who persecute you.” “You’ve heard it said do not commit adultery, I say you look lustfully at a woman and have committed adultery in your heart.” “Do not judge others or you too will be judged.”

The disciples are shocked by Jesus' sermon, sit in silence while the crowd wonders at his teaching. The effect of the sermon is in itself to drive the listener to dependence upon God, realizing how hard it is to consistently live one's life in blessed Godly ways, which also then has the effect of making us gentler towards one another as we realize that we all do our best and we all fall short together. We are driven by Jesus' sermon to a full awareness of our dependence and reliance on God's mercy ultimately and God's merciful work of sacrifice and love through Jesus Christ, which alone, is what saves us. Amen.

We ask your blessing on these ingredients O God.

May they feed your beloved children who have no home and who live on the streets.

And may the people who serve the sandwiches bring your love with them

So that the homeless can receive not just a sandwich but a taste of your love and care as well.

Amen.

BENEDICTION