

Blessed

Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz

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14:11

"Blessed" Pilgrim Church UCC, January 29, 2017, Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (Matthew 5:1-12)

This week we hear some of Jesus' most famous teachings. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is depicted as climbing atop a mountain, sitting down, and looking out upon the crowds with his disciples surrounding him. He begins to teach and pronounces his blessings upon them. The Beatitudes are famous for a reason—they are both comforting and challenging, both admirable and evoke reservations.

There's a show I love called *Rev.* about a priest in the Church of England. That priest has a crisis of faith to the point that he can't even get out of bed. His wife finds him burrowed under the covers reciting the Beatitudes. He's broken his own heart and softly cries as he recites: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." [1] It's a difficult scene to watch because the emotions are raw. Though there's something powerful about Jesus pronouncing blessings on those who need to hear them the most.

The Beatitudes anchor Christians. Jesus is calling us to be his disciples who live out the virtues of these blessings. Some say that Matthew's version of the Beatitudes are a more spiritualized or even sanitized version of Luke's Beatitudes. You see Luke says "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" not "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" as Matthew relates. [2] Luke presents Jesus as focusing on the poor in his ministry knowing that Jesus was not from the upper echelons of society himself. Yet the poor and the poor in spirit both need God's blessing if we're honest. Someone can have a whole lot of money but an empty life after all.

Now the Beatitudes can seem just plain impractical. As Seminary Professor Charles James Cook relates, "To be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful, and meek will get you nowhere in a culture grounded in competition and fear. Perhaps this is why most references to the Beatitudes imply that in giving his instruction, Jesus was literally turning the values of the world upside down." [3] But we don't need to look at them as impractical teachings that no one but a saint could actually live out. We can use the Beatitudes to ground lived expressions of our Christian faiths. Cook explains that simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion are the underlying principles we find in the Beatitudes that help us be entirely in the world and yet not become cynical by the difficulties we experience in our lives and in the world around us.

Let's take simplicity first. If we live out the Beatitude principles it means that we hear the words simply spoken by Jesus. We don't try to layer the words with our own prejudices and perceptions that the task at hand is impossible. We may think that the meek are trampled in our society—why would we even want to be meek? But another way of framing this is by realizing that we do have more courage when we hear Jesus saying to us that we are blessed in our lives when we demonstrate humility, when we bring a peaceful presence to situations, when we open our hearts to one another, when we show mercy to those who long to be seen and heard. It's not about Jesus wanting his followers to get trampled by those in power. It's about Jesus wanting his followers to be humble.

The Beatitudes were in the headlines recently because they made an appearance at the Presidential Inauguration. Rev. Dr. Samuel Rodriguez (President of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference) who has sometimes been critical of Donald Trump regarding his stance on immigration came to the podium for the Invocation and read a modern translation of the Beatitudes. Rev. Dr. Rodriguez then sat back down. No commentary. No prayer. Just a simple reading of Jesus' words. He read a modern translation: "God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. God blesses those who mourn for they will be comforted. God blesses those who are humble for they will inherit the earth. God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice for they will be satisfied. God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy." [4]

You may not have even heard about this moment, but people wondered if this was a small subversive act—of a minister speaking truth to power. You can't help but wonder how people heard it sitting up on that dais especially if you don't overanalyze Jesus' words and let them be in their simplicity. "God blesses those who are poor. God blesses those who are humble. God blesses those who are merciful." Powerful words in troubling times, no?

Let's move onto hopefulness. Perhaps one of the worst attitudes to overcome these days is cynicism. Cynicism is that inclination to believe that people are motivated by self-interest alone, and it's just a general distrust of peoples' motives. Sometimes it feels like to be cynical is to be cool. Or the attitude becomes to just not worry about issues we see in our world because that's just the way it is and we need to just get used to it. When looking at the millions of people who marched last weekend in the Women's March around the world one didn't see cynicism on display, one saw hopefulness. No matter where we stand politically it's our right in this country to peacefully use our hearts, hands, and voices to advocate for the values we hold dear.

If we want to effect change and fight the good fight, we must have hope. Again Cook says, "We place our hope on Christ, who offered hope to the hopeless. Thus we are able to approach the world with a spirit of hope, even when the outward signs indicate otherwise. When we are hopeful, we stand in the world sure of the possibility that the day will come when mercy, humility, peace, and love are the descriptions of what it means to live." [5]

At the end of the day, the line between religion and politics is not always so clear. Our religious convictions shape our political convictions. If we take to heart Jesus' words—blessed are those who mourn—doesn't that mean that we open our hearts to the parents in Chicago whose child died from gun violence? That we maybe even take it a step further and advocate for common sense gun laws? If we take to heart Jesus' words blessed are the peacemakers—doesn't that mean that we want to support the community dialogues that occur all over the country to bring youth and police together to actually listen to one another and see each other as human beings? As Christians we place our hope in Jesus Christ and we know that he offered hope to the hopeless, offered compassion to all. These deeply-held religious convictions shape our politics. Because we may see people as blessed that others don't--like refugees longing to escape violence and persecution.

The final principle of living out the Beatitudes is compassion. Simplicity feeds into hopefulness which feeds into compassion. If there is one attribute we know Jesus had, it's compassion. Remember that compassion goes deeper than pity or sympathy. It's not just about feeling sorry for someone. It's not just about walking along the same path as someone else. It's about walking in another person's shoes. Instead of just politicizing recent events we can ask ourselves how it would feel to be a refugee coming to the United States. We put ourselves in their shoes to have compassion. President of Lutheran Theological Seminary David Lose explains that in the Beatitudes "Jesus points us to recognize that God's kingdom isn't a place far away but is found whenever we honor each other as God's children, bear each other's

burdens, bind each other's wounds, and meet each other's needs.”[6] We have power to help create the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Or let's remember Rabbi Harold Kushner telling a story about the importance of relationships, showing the essence of compassion. Rabbi Kushner wrote: “I was sitting on a beach one summer day watching two children, a boy and a girl, playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sand castle by the waters edge, with gates and towers and moat and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand. I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle. I realize that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who had somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh.”[7]

Churches can grow as blessed communities through study, prayer, and service both within their walls and outside in the world. We can grow as a blessed community through compassion. The truth is that in churches people do come and go, pastors come and go. But the relationships built here can sustain us even if they don't last forever. If we have people in our lives who can hold our hands when the waves come even for a little while—we are blessed indeed.

Jesus declares us blessed and as his hands and feet in the world asks us to bless others. Jesus calls for us to bless the poor and the poor in spirit. To bless those who mourn and those who are meek. To bless those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. To bless the merciful. To bless the pure in heart. To bless the peacemakers. To bless those who are persecuted. For ours is the kingdom of heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Matthew 5:4, 5, 7, and 8, NRSV.

[2] Luke 6:20 and Matthew 5:3.

[3] Charles James Cook, Pastoral Perspective of Matthew 5:1-12 in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1, 308.

[4] Charles P. Pierce, “Today was just the Beginning. The Reckoning will Come.” Esquire. January 20, 2017. <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/politics/a52437/donald-trump-inaug...>

[5] Cook, Pastoral Perspective of Matthew 5:1-12 in Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, 312.

[6] David Lose, “Epiphany 4A—Recognizing Blessing,” <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/epiphany-4a-recognizing-blessing/>

[7] Rabbi Harold Kushner, as quoted by Terry Hershey in Sacred Necessities: Gifts for Living with Passion, Purpose, and Grace (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2005), 170-171.