

God Bless You

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. **2** And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **12** Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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Jesus’ first sermon, the way Matthew tells it, began with blessings.

Before the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called his first disciples, his closest followers - and began his ministry of healing and kingdom building in the Galilean countryside. On the mountainside, he sat down to teach Peter, Andrew, James and John - with a crowd listening in.

It was a crowd of folks who'd been hurt and sick, poor and marginalized, occupied by the Romans. They'd followed Jesus because he'd been talking about a kingdom that was not the Roman Empire. They'd followed Jesus because he healed those who had no hope and touched the untouchable. And then, he preached blessings.

Blessed are the poor, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers - these blessings were not abstract to the fishermen or those with Jesus that day. Blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who are persecuted - Jesus was talking about the people in this crowd. In offering these blessings, Jesus was saying:

Blessed are *you*.

O, God bless *you*.

Blessed are you, the lowly fisherman and you, the reviled tax collector, blessed are you the leper and you, with epilepsy, and blessed are you who are poor and you whose hearts are breaking, blessed are you who are hungry and you who are trying to do right and you who want to be builders of God's kingdom. You're blessed in God's sight.

Peter: O, God bless *you*....Blessed are you in being merciful as you walk this land, for you will receive mercy. Walk through the crowds healing in my name.

James: O, God bless *you*...Blessed are you who are meek - that is to say you who will not turn to violence, for you will inherit the earth. Blessed are you, peacemaker, for you are a child of God.

Andrew: O God bless *you*...Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for in your hunger, you will join in a vision for a world without hunger, and others will be filled.

The crowds heard Jesus speaking about them and to them, too.

O, God bless *you*. When you experience difficulty, here's a word of hope. The beatitudes don't deny pain. They aren't platitudes. In Bible study this week the word promise came to mind. O God bless you, Jesus was saying, I promise you God is with you. As Rev. Debie Thomas says, "The Beatitudes assure me that God doesn't exit my life when I find myself in low places. If anything, God is *most* present in the shadows. Most attentive in the fire. God is always close to the destitute, the anguished, the lost, and the confused."¹

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2511-the-blessing-and-the-bite>

But the beatitudes are not just a word to make folks in pain feel a little better. The beatitudes say something about the *world as God wants it to be*, and the beatitudes invite us into that world.

If the poor in spirit are encouraged, the mourners comforted, the meek strengthened....perhaps Jesus could see them becoming kingdom builders, people of vision, courage and strength. People who can do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

Jesus talked about the kingdom of God - a vastly different world from the empire of Rome - and invited his disciples and the crowds to be kingdom builders. Get on board, he's called out - turn your lives and follow me to God's world. It's already and not yet - we are building it as we live in it.

Here's one way to think of this. The kingdom of God is where the meek and the mourners, the peacemakers and the righteous, are blessed. So if you are in a state where these folks are not lifted up, cared for, healed, welcomed - you are not in God's kingdom, and you've got work to do.

Alma Tinoco Ruiz says that Matthew's beatitudes were intended as an act of resistance to oppression and a message of liberation to the poor - they were not meant as a confirmation for the rich or set of spiritual platitudes.²

This makes sense when we consider Jesus' own story because Jesus himself was poor.

Howard Thurman, wrote in 1949, "Jesus was a poor Jew....The economic predicament with which he was identified in birth placed him initially with the great mass of men on the earth. The masses of the earth are poor....in his poverty he was more truly Son of man than he would have been if the incident of family or birth had made him a rich son of Israel."³ Not only was he poor, but 70-90% of the folks around him were poor, under the Roman Empire.⁴ Think about that percentage. Given how often he fed them with real food, it only makes sense Jesus' promises were concrete. They often get spiritualized and moved into the next life - but Jesus said God's realm was at hand.

The audience of the Beatitudes was not just those four fishermen, not just a crowd gathered on a hill, and not just Matthew's community either. We're the audience. The

² Christian Century magazine, January 2023

³ *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 7

⁴ Liz Theoharis in *Always With You?*

church throughout time. We often think religion judges who deserves mercy, grace, love, blessing. From his very first sermon Jesus said - it's not the people you'd expect. From his very first sermon Jesus said: God's blessings are wide and abundant and surprising. In every gathering of Jesus' followers, there are those who are poor and meek and mourning, those that no one ever expected to be blessed and who need to hear,

O God bless *you*,

anew.

O God bless you, God promises to be with you, God's kingdom is going to turn everything right side up.

In our Council retreat a few weeks ago, we kept talking about Care. We asked how we care for our members and care for our neighbors. It seems to me that Care is another way to say Bless. How can we bless our members (those who mourn and those who are meek and those who are peacemakers) and how can we bless our neighbors (those who are poor in spirit and those who hunger for righteousness and those who are just plain poor and hungry)? How can we be about blessing?

The church - universal and local - is a little, momentary instantiation of the kingdom of God. It's a concrete effort to do things the way God asks us to. So the beatitudes promise us blessing and reorient us church folk to blessing and mercy, peacemaking and healing and feeding.

O God bless you,

who would respond to God's love,

by blessing others.

O God bless *you*,

Kingdom-builders.

Amen.