

January 29, 2017
Matthew 5:1-12

The Beatitudes are, perhaps, the most well-known verses in the Bible. We have heard them over and over. They have brought comfort and hope to countless people throughout the centuries since Jesus spoke them. These 12 verses begin Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and immediately follow where we left off last week with Jesus calling his first disciples and proclaiming to the world, "Repent (Turn) for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

So what is a Beatitude anyway? Put simply, a beatitude is a blessing. It is an announcement of God's favor. It is a declaration of God's grace. It is interesting Jesus' sermon begins in this fashion. He begins not with words of instruction on what we should do but He begins with words of God's favor. Fred Craddock states, "Appearing at the beginning, they (Beatitudes) say that God's favor precedes all our endeavors." Prior to our doing anything God speaks first and offers the promise of God's grace. Anything that follows on our behalf is solely in response to what God has instituted first. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount echoes God's revelation of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus which begins in a similar manner with God stating first, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

And in the Beatitudes God's blessing and favor is proclaimed to those the world would least expect. Not the elite, wealthy, powerful and privileged but rather Jesus announces blessings upon those whom society has deemed unworthy and left behind: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted in seeking peace and justice in Christ's name. Just as Jesus' ministry begins with ushering in the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven by calling forth disciples who are ordinary, average, everyday fishermen and healing the sick, the less fortunate, the demon possessed, the despised, the forgotten ones so to do His opening words proclaim God's favor upon the least of them. Jesus wastes no time revealing in action and teaching what the kingdom of heaven is like. A kingdom in which God welcomes all. In the words of Pope Francis, "Welcoming the other means welcoming God in person."

There is a critical view of the cross we Lutherans' cling to known as the theology of the cross. The Beatitudes are a reflection of what Luther meant when he coined this phrase. Theology of the cross always points to God's presence in Christ on the cross. It points to a God who comes into the world amidst suffering, pain, sin and death. It points to a God who comes to the marginalized, oppressed, lonely, and ill. It points to a God who eats with

sinner, sits with the sick, and touches the dying and dead, and who not only sees that pain but also experiences that pain on the cross. It points to a God who suffers for all and bears the evil forces of sin and death on the cross. It points to the hope of new life through the resurrection. The Beatitudes express this theology by revealing that God's favor, which extends to all, is given also and specifically to those who suffer, who hunger and thirst, who strive for justice in the face of fear and persecution, who mourn, and who are meek.

The beatitudes are a painting of how the kingdom of heaven will be when Christ returns. They are a liberating word of freedom and hope to all who suffer in the present age from social injustice as they offer the promise of God's favor and that the future will bring peace, comfort, and happiness. So with that said, does anyone hear the beatitudes and ask, "So are these conditions Jesus is establishing in order to be blessed? Do I have to fit into one of these categories? Do I have to become meeker, hungrier for righteousness and justice, purer in spirit, or mourn more? Am I not good enough the way I am to receive God's blessing?"

I know I have often felt this after reading the Beatitudes - often left feeling not good enough to receive God's blessing. Even though I try, as best I can I know that daily I falter and fail in my quest to respond to the call Jesus

puts forth. I am pulled into our consumerist society and spend my money on things I probably don't always need instead of giving it to a more worthwhile cause or to its rightful owner - God. I give in to fear and don't speak out against injustice when I see it or I contribute to systems which promote the very opposite of the kingdom Jesus revealed to the world. I fall into the trap of thinking I can do it all on my own.

And then this week I came across this quote from Pastor David Lose and gained new insight into the Beatitudes,

But let's be clear – or at least pay attention to the fact that Matthew is quite clear – Jesus isn't setting up conditions or terms but rather is just plain blessing people. All kinds of people. All kinds of down-and-out, extremely vulnerable, and at the bottom of the ladder people. Why? To proclaim that God regularly shows up in mercy and blessing just where you least expect God to be – with the poor rather than the rich, those who are mourning rather than celebrating, the meek and the peacemakers rather than the strong and victorious. This is not where citizens of the ancient world look for God and, quite frankly, it's not where citizens of our own world do either. If God shows up here, Jesus is saying, blessing the weak and the vulnerable, then God will be everywhere, showering all creation and its inhabitants with blessing.

God's grace does seem foolishness as Paul states in our Epistle lesson today. A God coming to save the world that does so not by fame, fortune, and power but instead by becoming a wandering refugee eating with the less fortunate, the outcast, and the sinners seems completely ridiculous. And a God in Christ who in the face of death, of persecution, of mockery, of being the

scapegoat prays for forgiveness to those who mock and crucify him rather than using the power granted through his Father to save himself from pain and death is incomprehensible. But this is God! This is a God whom we can't fully comprehend and understand. But one thing we know that Jesus reveals is our God is a God full of grace, love, and forgiveness. Our God is a God who relentlessly pursues justice, seeks peace and comfort for the poor, ill, and oppressed, and who in the cross of Christ and his resurrection grants to all who believe in Him the promise of God's blessings – forgiveness, eternal life, and the power to become God's children.