

February 1, 2020

Matthew 5:1-12

(Preached at the Free*Indeed* Congregation within the Anamosa State Penitentiary)

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.

The Beatitudes are some of the most well-known verses in the Bible. Bringing comfort and hope to countless people throughout the centuries since Jesus spoke them. These 12 verses begin Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and fall on the heels of the calling of his first disciples.

So, just what is Beatitude anyway? Put simply, a beatitude is a blessing, an announcement of God's favor, a declaration of God's grace. It is interesting Jesus' sermon begins in this fashion. He begins not with words of instruction but, rather, he begins with words of promise, life and identity. Pastor and Professor Fred Craddock wrote, "Appearing at the beginning, they (Beatitudes) say that God's favor precedes all our endeavors." Prior to the disciples doing anything God speaks first and offers the promise of God's grace as Jesus says, "You are blessed!"

Anything that follows is solely in response to what God has instituted and done 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." It is God who has acted and everything else flows from God's faithfulness to God's people.

When I read a biblical passage, study, contemplate and pray about preparing a sermon I often try and place myself into the story. What did those first disciples hear? What did they need to hear? What did the community Matthew was writing to need to hear?

Jesus has just called and brought those disciples out of their boats ... out of the comforts of home ... away from their families and friends ... and into a virtual unknown future and new way of life. I suspect they were struggling with their identity, purpose, and even how they were going to survive.

In similar fashion, Matthew's community would have been facing their own identity crisis. The Temple in Jerusalem, the house of God, lay in ruins at the hands of the Roman government; probably, leaving the community wondering what next? Maybe even some feeling as if God is nowhere to be found. I suspect some are poor in spirit.

One of my favorite childhood books was *The Little Engine That Could* (Watty Piper; Platt & Munk, Publishers; New York © 1976, 1961, 1954, 1945, 1930.) I suspect many of you know the story; however, just in case you don't I will give a brief recap. There was a train chugging along the tracks carrying lots of toys and treats for the children. That is until it started its ascent up a mountain when it broke down. Along came three trains who were asked to help pull the train over the mountain, but each refused. Two deemed themselves much too important than to pull this train over the mountain while a third resigns itself unable to do so given its age and deteriorating physical condition. Then a fourth comes along, a much smaller locomotive, who agrees to try and pull the much larger one over the mountain. As it steams forward with all its might chugging ahead inch by inch, steam and smoke billowing from it high into the sky above, the little train tells itself over and over, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can," until finally it does succeed as the two trains crest the summit of the mountain and head back down.

Jesus, too, is on the mountain with his disciples, just as Moses had been when he received the gift of the commandments from God. In his very first teaching to those disciples in Matthew's gospel I envision these words of blessing as the mantra those disciples will repeat again and again as they venture down the mountain and live into their calling as Jesus' disciples.

They are the “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can” echoed by the little engine that could; but instead of “I think I can” Jesus is establishing in his disciples then and now an identity that starts out of abundant grace and gift by stating, “You are blessed, You are blessed, You are blessed.”

Jesus will soon come down the mountain with those disciples. They will encounter the powers of the world that defy God’s way. They will encounter evil spirits, illness in all its various shapes and sizes, injustice and persecution, hunger and thirst, isolation and exclusion, rejection and hostility, and they will encounter death. But through it all Jesus has given them words that will forever be etched in their minds, heart, and soul to form them into their calling as his disciples by stating, “You are blessed.”

Jesus has called them to partner with him in his mission to usher in God’s way of life, one which is patterned after the very characteristics spelled out by these Beatitudes – being vessels of compassion, humility, mercy - while striving for peace and justice, striving to spread the light of Christ, and acknowledging our brokenness and need for God’s help to heal our aching souls that often find themselves poor in spirit. This is who they are to be. It is who we are called to be.

But let’s not confuse these Beatitudes as conditional. That is, in order to be blessed, one must first be meek or mourn, or thirst for righteousness or be merciful; because I have heard them proclaimed in that manner and even I have fallen into the trap of feeling as if I am not worthy of God’s blessings when I fail to show mercy, strive for justice, or am consumed by greed and give into the false lies of Satan that lead me to think I can make it on my own. Let’s face it, as the Apostle Paul writes, “everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard” (Romans 3:23, NLT). Yet, he immediately reminds us, “yet, God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty of our sins” (Romans 3:24, NLT) God saved us from our sin while we were still sinners and God blesses solely out of God’s goodness.

Pastor David Lose writes,

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.

This is God. A God whom we can't fully comprehend and understand. Yet in Jesus, our eyes are opened to see our God is full of grace, love, forgiveness and mercy. 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 and the power to become God's children.

Hear the words! Live the words! Believe the words! Spread the words! We are blessed ... just as we are ... no matter what we have done in the past ... we are blessed! When you feel as if you're at the end of your rope or have lost hope or contemplate whether following Jesus and spreading his great love is worth it when at times doing so may bring the ridicule, scorn, or rejection by some ... remember faithful servants ... **YOU ARE BLESSED! YOU ARE BLESSED! YOU ARE BLESSED!**