November 1, 2020
Matthew 5:1-12

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 a 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 were nowhere to be found. I suspect some were poor in spirit and others continuing to mourn for so much that has been lost. Might they have been losing hope the kingdom Jesus so often talked about was but a pipe dream.

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 accent up a mountain and broke down. Along came three trains who were asked to help pull the broken-down train over the mountain, but each refused. Two deemed themselves much too important to pull this train over the mountain while a third resigned 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 train over the mountain. As it steamed forward with all its might chugging ahead inch by inch, smoke billowing high into the sky, the little train told itself over and over, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can," until finally it did succeed as the two trains crested the summit of the mountain and headed back down.

Jesus, too, is on the mountain and in his very first teaching to his disciples I envision these words of blessing as the mantra they will repeat again and again. 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 and to spread the light of Christ. Also, acknowledging their brokenness and need for God's help to heal their aching soul's poor in spirit at times. 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 have fallen into the trap of feeling as if I am not worthy of God's blessings when failing 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 goes on to state, "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.

We find ourselves in a perilous time with so much uncertainty. We are grieving. We are tired. Zoom fatigue has set in on many of us. I cannot recall the last time I saw a colleague in person, nor do I have any idea when I will again. I have not seen my parents since the onset of this virus. Probably all of you are in the same boat one way or another. I have found myself poor in spirit at times and I can only imagine many of you have as well.

I am also exhausted from the countless phone calls and text messages received in the last several weeks. I am frustrated with the ridiculous number of campaign fliers I continue to toss in the recycling bin all the while wonder just how many trees, carbon emissions and money have been spent on something I wonder if any of us even look at, let alone read. It is upsetting to watch one more commercial mocking a political rival and presenting information one can only guess if factual or not.

Regardless of the outcome on Tuesday, this week will be one in which many will celebrate, and many will be left hurting and dejected. So many have worked tirelessly, volunteered countless hours, and put so much into the outcome they believe to be best. Some will see hope while others hope will be dashed. We must remember, Jesus' blessings extend to even those we may disagree with. Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ will be left hurting.

Amidst all that named above and whatever else it is you may be experiencing in these turbulent times there is hope! There is always hope. There will be a day when we are comforted. There will be a day we are filled. There will be a day justice will reign. There will be a day our spirits will always be strong and overflow with the abundance of grace. There will be a day when mercy reigns supreme. There will be a day we will join the saints in the kingdom of God. There will be a day this virus will be gone. There will be a day. This is our hope and in the meantime we will rejoice because we know this to be true and we know, through the work of the Spirit and the saving grace of Jesus Christ, our reward is great in heaven.

Also, amidst all we experience presently and will until the kingdom Jesus speaks of comes into its fullness, hear these words! Live these words! Believe these words! Spread these 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 … remember faithful servants … YOU ARE BLESSED! YOU ARE BLESSED! YOU ARE BLESSED!