

### First, Blessed

Today we read the first 12 verses of the Sermon on the Mount. If you already sneaked a look at the announcements in today's bulletin, or if you read it in the PresbEnews published earlier this week, you know that next Sunday we will read the entire Sermon on the Mount in worship, 3 chapters worth of Matthew's gospel. But today, we read these 12 verses to set the stage for the world's best-known sermon.

Or at least its title is the best-known. I'm not so sure how many people actually know its contents, but Christians around the world are likely to recognize the "Sermon on the Mount" as the teachings of Jesus. Reading the entire sermon through, as we will next Sunday, I hope you will hear how verses you've heard in various contexts fit together and that you will be among those Christians who actually know what Jesus said when he preached on the mountain!

But we begin with the beginning. And while this sermon on the mountain will tell Jesus' disciples and anyone else listening how we should live, what we should do, it begins with nine blessings. Nine pronouncements of who we are in the eyes of God. Nine startling statements of truth, about being more than doing, the starting place for living the way of Christ.

You may recall that Jesus began his ministry by picking up the theme of John the Baptist, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near." Then he found some disciples to go with him, and he demonstrated the presence of God's realm by curing the sick throughout Galilee. His reputation spread in the region, and people considered hopeless found hope in him. People with demons, those with epilepsy, those who were paralyzed, those who had pain that no one else could touch were cured by Jesus. Crowds began to follow him. And so, Matthew tells us, Jesus went up on a mountain, like Moses, and spoke the words we know as this famous sermon.

I think he was speaking about those very people he had cured when he began, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The church in which I grew up has a high arch, where the main part of the sanctuary meets the chancel area where the choir sits. The arch is decorated with these blessings, the Beatitudes. As a teenager, I spent a lot of time looking at these sayings and trying to figure out what they meant. They sounded holy, but they were confusing. I didn't know why we might aspire to be "poor in spirit," and certainly not "persecuted" or "reviled." I decided that I would choose my way of being "blessed," and I chose the "peacemaker" goal, so I could be called a child of God.

It turns out I had it backwards. The blessings Jesus speaks are not goals to be attained if we want to be good Christians. No, they are starting places for understanding how God is already present in our lives. It doesn't matter how hard I might try to hunger and thirst for righteousness (another one of the Beatitudes I found attractive for my life), God has already promised to satisfy that hunger. God is already blessing our longings, our needs, our inadequacies, and our brokenness. And whatever Godly desires reside in us—well, guess where they came from? They are from God. We long for God because we are God's. We are blessed. We are beloved of God. Jesus just brings that out into the open.

And what he shows us in these enigmatic, provocative, paradoxical statements is that true blessing is not what the world tells us it is. Conventional wisdom might say,

Blessed are the rich in things and in self assurance.

Blessed are those who are untouched by loss.

Blessed are the powerful.

Blessed are those who are "realistic" about righteousness, compromising at every turn.

Blessed are those who demand and exact an eye for an eye.

Blessed are the crafty and opportunistic.

Blessed are those bold enough to make war.

Blessed are those who, doing good things, receive many accolades.

Blessed are those who, following Jesus, are widely praised and adored.

(Matthew Myer Boulton, 2013, in *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Vol 1*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, p. 76)

Instead, Jesus tells us that blessing rests on those who mourn, the meek, and the merciful. Instead, Jesus names as blessed the pure in heart and those who are persecuted—foreshadowing the way of the cross he will follow. The beatitudes are blessings, and they are reversals. They are not a "to do" list nor are they platitudes, meant to settle our anxieties. They are a description of life within the community of God's love and justice, where grace and obedience intertwine. They are profoundly meant for those who are living now in this unfinished world, and they are promises of the fulfillment of God's everlasting reign. The poet Susan McCaslin calls them "radical riffs," "explosions of light," and "spice boxes of paradox." (published in *Passion and Peace*, 2017, Wood Lake Publishing, p. 75)

And if you read her poem on the cover of today's bulletin and wonder if "mind-boggling koans" is a typo, as this week's bulletin proofreader did, let me explain. A koan is a paradoxical statement that those who practice Zen Buddhism meditate upon. Such as "the sound of one hand clapping." It teaches us not to rely on logic, because there is more to the universe than logic. If you want insight into the mind of God, try pondering Jesus' blessings.

They're good for a lifetime, you'll never master them and be ready to move on. And while they describe more than prescribe life in God's household of peace, they also stand as a reminder to us when we are swept up in the ways of the world, calling us to align our lives more truly with the way of Christ.

And so I return to the first of the blessings, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It is about our calling to emptiness, about not being filled with oneself, aware of one's need for God. It is about not knowing, but asking to know God. It is about recognizing that God-shaped hole which lives in each of us and NOT filling it with worldly pleasures, with entertainment, with work, or with substances which numb but ultimately do not satisfy. It is about being an empty vessel for God's goodness and mercy and love, and receiving the blessing of the rule of God.

And then we can begin to do justice and love mercy, because then we can walk humbly with God. Our calling begins, and ends, with blessing.

So I borrow the blessing of writer Debie Thomas to conclude.

“So now go. Become what you are, give away what you seek, bless what God blesses, and turn this world on its head. Rejoice and be glad, for you are God’s children, and the kingdom of heaven is yours. The One who blesses you is near.”

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay> 1/27/2020) Amen!