

April 26, 2020
National Presbyterian Church
“Bigger Than We Are”
Matthew 5:1-12
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Since last September we’ve been basing our sermons on Jesus’ life and ministry using the account in the Gospel according to Luke. Then last week we looked at The Gospel of John’s account of Jesus meeting a core group of his disciples after they had returned to Galilee. Today we begin several weeks of focus on Jesus’ teaching as we find it in chapters 5-7 of Matthew’s Gospel, what we call the “Sermon on the Mount.” The Sermon on the Mount describes what life looks like in the Kingdom of God, a reality that has already begun in Jesus Christ and will one day be fully realized.

I

Matthew tells us that Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven. “Kingdom of Heaven” in Matthew is the same thing as when Jesus speaks of the “Kingdom of God” in Luke and Mark. And so as our passage begins, Jesus sits down, his disciples approach him and he teaches them about this new kingdom. From the outset we see that Jesus is not simply “one of the prophets” that so many thought him to be. He is nothing less than God’s anointed king—the Messiah. There on the mountain he sits—like a king on his throne. His disciples approach him like subjects in a royal court, sitting at his feet. And as the crowd looks on, the king delivers his inaugural address, in which he lays out in considerable detail what life in his new kingdom will be like.

The first word out of his mouth—one that he will repeat eight more times—is the word “blessed.” This list of blessings is sometimes called “The Beatitudes” because the Latin word *beatus* means blessed. But a more accurate literal translation is the word “happy.” But we need to be careful here, because in our popular use “happiness” is a subjective thing. Different things make different kinds of people happy. And to be honest, none of the things that Jesus mentions are what we think of when we think of what makes most people happy. But that’s kind of the point. Here at the inauguration of his new kingdom, Jesus is telling his followers that *he* knows what *will* make them happy. Another way of understanding the scene is to see that Jesus is telling his followers, “I have wonderful news for you... news that will make you happy.” And then he offers nine phrases, grounded in a variety of Old Testament passages. The first four are very important to read in order; they are followed by an additional four that talk about what the new transformed life looks like for those who are part of the new kingdom. They finish with a warning. Together these nine blessings tell us what it means to live as citizens under the reign of Jesus Christ.

II

There are a couple of misconceptions about these well-known verses that should be clarified at the outset. Jesus wasn’t simply a great teacher. So many have pointed to the Sermon on the Mount as the supreme example of Jesus the teacher. And here in the first 12 verses he supposedly sets out the main themes of what he will go on to say in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. But describing Jesus in this way is a real misunderstanding. People often speak of Jesus’ wonderful teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, and if people would only follow the teachings in it, the world would be a better place. Well that’s not entirely false. But so much more is going on here than Jesus simply telling everyone the proper way to behave, a way that seems out of reach for most of us. This “wonderful news” that Jesus is announcing is not simply an exhortation that “you all ought to try real hard to live like this.” The beatitudes *are* saying, people who already are like

this are in good shape. They should be happy and celebrate.

So these are *not* timeless truths about the way the world is, nor are they universal claims about human behavior. If Jesus *was* saying this, then he was wrong. Because we hear on the news and more and more we know firsthand that those who mourn often go uncomforted, the meek don't inherit the earth, and those who long for justice frequently take that longing to the grave. But what Jesus is actually saying in the Sermon on the Mount is this: "Let me tell you: this world *could* be different. Actually, it's **going** to be different. It's going to be turned upside down – or rather, it's going to be turned the right way up at long last! And that process is starting right now! Why don't you join me and help make it happen?"

The beatitudes are an introduction to something that's starting to happen with the start of Jesus' ministry, not about so many general truths in life. It is gospel—*good news*; not good advice. In today's world most people think that happiness and wonderful news are found in success, wealth, long life, and victory over opponents. But here we see Jesus offering happiness for the humble, the poor, the mourners and the peacemakers.

III

It begins with being poor in spirit. Jesus says that the poor in spirit possess the kingdom of heaven. It's essential that we understand being poor in spirit; it's the key to what it means to be meek or mournful or hungry or thirsty or pure in heart or peacemaking or persecuted for righteousness' sake. To begin with the word more precisely means "destitute."

To be poor in spirit is to recognize our complete dependence upon God; it means that in and of ourselves we have absolutely nothing; we depend entirely upon **God's** riches. Our life and our goods are nothing apart from the author of our salvation. The poor in spirit are those who truly understand that apart from God's work in us we would never be able to follow and obey the Lord. It means living in utter dependence on God's grace. To be poor in spirit means to admit that our problems are beyond us, to admit that we can't deal with our own needs and difficulties. And the wonderful news attached to that is that it is precisely the poor in spirit who receive the Kingdom of Heaven, the Reign of God. If we're poor in spirit, we get to be a part of what Jesus came to bring. Poverty of spirit is not an optional character trait, it's the basic orientation of the Christian. The poor in spirit know our need for God; we can rely on nothing or no one else.

IV

We can see how the beatitudes build on one another by looking at how the order progresses. If we truly are poor in spirit, that will lead us to mourn. We know what it means to mourn losses in life; we know what it means to mourn loved ones who die. But do we know what it means to mourn our lack of intimacy with God? Do we mourn that? Do we know what it means to mourn whatever it is that separates us from God? The author of the Book of Hebrews talks about the sin that clings so closely, one that easily entangles us. This sin may not be the same for everyone. It's the one to which you are particularly prone; your favorite sin. You probably know what that is for you. It's the one that gets you every time. It's the one that causes you to echo the Apostle Paul when he says, "I keep doing the things I don't want to do, and the things I want to do I can't seem to do. Who will rescue me from this body of death?" It's when we mourn our spiritual poverty that we will be open to God's grace. And to know God's grace is to find deep happiness.

Mourning leads to meekness, which is not the same thing as weakness or passivity. A good synonym for meekness is gentleness. And actually only the strong can be gentle. That's what God's grace coming to us in Jesus Christ gives us strength. In Christ we are reconciled to God as

beloved children, heirs with Christ. In him Paul tells us we receive every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. This is real strength, and it enables us to be gentle to those around us.

Meekness leads to a genuine longing—a hungering and thirsting—for righteousness. The meek yearn to be made right with God; they crave for God to do in their lives what God alone can do—make them righteous. If your appetite is preoccupied with what only God can provide, you should be happy about that and celebrate. Because you will be filled. This is not something we do for ourselves. We can't fill ourselves up; only God can fill us. We have God's filling to look forward to, if we hunger and thirst for righteousness. Out of meekness, after mourning our spiritual poverty

The next four beatitudes describe what a life transformed by the grace of God looks like—what will happen to a follower of Jesus after their hungering for God's righteousness is filled. They will become merciful. And their hearts will pure. Soren Kierkegaard understood this when he wrote that “purity of heart is to will one thing.” That one thing is the will of God. If we want more than that we are double-minded. If you are pure in heart and will one thing, that's wonderful news that will make you happy, because you will see God. And if you will what God wills, you will be able to seek reconciliation with others. You will be a peacemaker. But then comes a warning: no matter how hard you may try to work for reconciliation, some will simply refuse to live at peace with you. There will be some who find the new kingdom Jesus proclaims distasteful and reject it. Because they reject Christ, they will reject you. But nevertheless this too is cause for happiness because it is evidence that we are on God's side.

V

Jesus the king is bringing in his kingdom. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus proclaims that he wants to bless the world—to make the world happy. And he intends to do this using people like those described in the Beatitudes... and he invites us to join. And so he says: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* – in other words, when God sets up his sovereign rule on earth as in heaven, he will use the poor in spirit to do it. Because people who are poor in spirit are ready to be taught and steered by God. They are not arrogant. They are like clay in the potter's hands. Will we be part of what God is doing in Jesus Christ?

He says, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” God will not bless the world through bossy people who bully others to get their way. God will do it through people who are humble. And by the time the high and mighty realize what's happening, the meek, because they are thinking about people other than themselves, have built hospitals, founded leper colonies, abolished slavery, looked after the orphans and widows, created charities and non-profits, founded schools, colleges and universities.

He says: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” God will bless the world through people who hunger and thirst for justice and have a passion to see that things are made right; they will be a sign of hope in a crooked world. God calls us to be pure in heart. The pure in heart are those without mixed motives. They do not do things because there is something in it for them. They do it because they know it is the right thing to do. It is what God wishes we do. Blessed are the peacemakers. As much as it was true in Jesus' day, how much more it is today.

We will be persecuted. The Beatitudes are not the ways of the world. Nevertheless, Jesus called his followers then and he calls us now to be his agents of the new world he is bringing. These are the type of people that God will bless the world through. In the end, the happiness Jesus speaks of is certainly about what God promises to do *to* us. Even more, it's the wonderful news of

what God is promising to do *through* us, his followers.

Conclusion

This week we heard in news reports that the new Coronavirus has been among us for weeks or even months longer than anyone first thought. It continues to dominate the headlines; it has changed the world we live in. 2000 years ago Jesus Christ announced that the long-anticipated and hoped for Kingdom of God was among us. He came announcing this good news. And that good news—the gospel—has spread over the centuries. We have seen our world transformed and healed in myriad and profound ways.

I think The Message by Eugene Peterson was able to capture the meaning of the Beatitudes in the wonderful way he translated Matthew 5:3-12. I want to read it by way of conclusion:

³ “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

⁴ “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

⁵ “You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

⁶ “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

⁷ “You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being (full of care) you find yourselves cared for.

⁸ “You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

⁹ “You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

¹⁰ “You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.

¹¹⁻¹² “Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!— for though they don’t like it, *I* do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

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