

## Blessed Reality

Many of you remember several pastors who preached at [Monticello] [Bethel] United Methodist Church in years gone by. Each one had his or her own special gifts and graces. Each one had a unique pulpit presence and style. Each one had taken classes in the art of preaching. Most of their professors had taught them how to begin a sermon—and how *not* to begin a sermon.

Once there was an itinerant preacher who never went to seminary. Who never took a preaching class. Who never prepared an ordination sermon for the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. But no sermon you will ever hear can affect your life more personally and more profoundly than his Sermon on the Mount. Today in Matthew's Gospel we hear how he begins that sermon.

Its opening verses are familiar. We know them. We know that, over time, they've come to be called the Beatitudes. They get this name from a Latin word that means *blessed*. The Beatitudes begin the Sermon on the Mount. As a sermon opener,

they get our attention. They get the attention of Jesus' first listeners, too. And the reason they get attention is that they sound so diametrically *different* from what first-century and twenty-first century people are used to hearing.

Even though these Beatitudes do have the same form as some popular sayings that circulated two thousand years ago. Each one began with a statement about the present and ended with a statement about the future. But the content of those sayings was different. They went something like this: *Fortunate are those who have plenty of grain in their barns and oil in their vats, for when famine comes, they shall not do without.* These sayings were about life in the real world.

Today's conventional wisdom doesn't sound much different, does it? *Fortunate are you if you have a sizable bank balance and a rock-solid investment portfolio, for in the event of an economic downturn, your comfortable lifestyle will not be adversely affected.* Still today, some believe that prosperity is a sign of divine favor.

But we live in a secular society that strives to convince us that whatever we've amassed, whatever we've acquired is completely due to our own merits, our own abilities, our own

strengths. Because we're self-made men and women! That's what we're told by this consumer-culture.

Which urges us to be competitive in the stockpiling of possessions, advising us that *whoever dies with the most stuff, wins*. Trying to convince us that it's all about us—because we're worth it! We're entitled. You and I live among an independent-spirited people who feel entitled to certain rights, not the least of which is the pursuit of happiness. People who spend large amounts of time and energy and resources chasing after happiness—never quite catching that elusive emotion—but still continuing to chase after it.

Because this is the real world. Right? Isn't this the way the world works? This worldview, these values, these philosophies permeate the air we breathe. They're grounded in a pervasive, prevailing, popular perception of reality.

So when you and I hear these words of Jesus that point to an *alternative* reality, to a radically different way of living in the world, we assume they must be intended for some kind of exalted super-Christians. The Beatitudes sound strange in our ears. We wonder how they can possibly apply to ordinary folk like you and me.

The Beatitudes don't sound at all like the reality we've been conditioned to accept, not at all like the apparent reality we observe in the world around us. In the world we live in, we've become accustomed to reports of conflict, violence, and war—not to reports of peacemaking. We've become accustomed to hearing about oppression, not mercy. We've become accustomed to forcefulness, not meekness. And so on. And so on.

Sometimes you and I forget; sometimes you and I need to be reminded that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we don't belong to the world. More than one interpreter has suggested that among the mourners Jesus blesses are those who grieve over the present state of the world—who lament its brokenness, but who don't accept the current situation as ultimate reality. Among the mourners Jesus blesses are those who know that sin and sorrow are not in accordance with God's will for God's people.

Every Sunday, we pray together for God's will to be done. In today's reading from the prophet Micah, we hear God's will for us, God's good intention for us—expressed in plain and simple language: *What does the Lord expect of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

We hear these words of Scripture resonating clearly in the Beatitudes of Jesus, who unpacks these instructions for us. Who puts flesh on them. Who shows us what they look like.

God's first-expressed desire is that you and I do justice. The word for *justice* is also translated *righteousness*. So when we hear Jesus teaching about righteousness, we know he means justice as well. God calls you to have a hunger for justice so overpowering that you can't help but see where the need exists, a hunger that gets translated into action that actually *accomplishes* justice. Justice for the forgotten. Justice for the powerless. Justice for the outcast.

These are the kinds of people Jesus hangs out with. These are the kind of people Jesus is criticized and finally crucified for reaching out to. When Jesus does such things, the powers that be don't approve. And when you and I do the same, the powers that be won't approve. Jesus tells us that we too will be reviled for seeking justice for those who need it most.

Reviled, yet blessed by God who requires something more of you and me: loving-kindness. Loving God and loving neighbor are the two great commandments. Loving God who

first loved us. God who loves human creatures so much that God becomes vulnerable.

Loving makes *us* vulnerable, too. When we become vulnerable, we open ourselves to loss and grief. To mourning. And to the comfort promised by this God of compassion, this God of loving-kindness. Loving-kindness flows into mercy; can't help but flow into mercy. How can we not be merciful—we who have received unfailing mercy?

From the One who invites us to join in walking humbly. In the Beatitudes, Jesus helps us understand what it means to walk humbly with God. Walking humbly has to do with spiritual poverty. With meekness. With purity of heart. These may not be easy for us. We live in a time and place that prize individual rights, along with a determination to be in control. But, my brothers and sisters, being poor in spirit means *surrendering* the need to be in control. Being poor in spirit means confessing utter dependency on our God.

God is in charge! And we are not. When we adopt a mindset of humility, we choose to live in the world as God's people. We choose to cast off attitudes of arrogance and aggression. We choose the way of non-violence. And purity of heart—loving

this one God whole-heartedly—means that in the center of our being, there's no room for any other master.

But only for the One whose love and salvation are revealed to us in both the Old Testament and the New. I think that in hearing the connections today between Micah's words of prophecy and the Beatitudes of Jesus, we grow in the understanding that there is but *one* story. And there is but one reality—a reality of blessing.

Fred Craddock notes that it's most fitting that blessings come at the very beginning of Jesus' sermon, rather than at the end. Because God's blessing and grace always come first, before any opportunity for human response. We don't deserve grace. We can't earn it. But lavished, poured-out grace and blessing undergird all our behavior, all our relationships, all our efforts to live the life of faithfulness depicted in these Beatitudes.

They give us a glimpse, a preview, of the rest of this keynote sermon of Jesus and of his ministry itself. He offers this sermon with his lips and with his life. He makes it a reality.

Jesus shows us a new way of living in a kingdom whose coming he asks us to pray for: a kingdom that draws near in him. The reign of God—the kingdom of heaven—isn't just an image

of the way things will be someday. It's the way things can be *now*. These blessings are signs of the reign of God, because they begin in the present and extend into the future. Like God's great kingdom itself, they have two dimensions: an *already* and a *not-yet*. But the *not-yet* is no less real than the *already*. For whenever we live into the kingdom, a measure of that very kingdom enters into us. And we have a part in bringing this heavenly kingdom closer; we have a share in its coming to earth.

These Beatitudes of Jesus are about how things work in the reality of God's reign. They're about growing into the likeness of Christ. They're about becoming more like the One who shows us the nature and character of this God we worship and serve.

Beloved, we worship and serve a God who brings about justice for the least and the last. We worship and serve a God whose loving-kindness runs like a golden thread through the tapestry of Scripture. We worship and serve a God who comes to walk the dusty roads of this earth with God's people. We worship and serve a God who weeps with us and suffers with us. We worship and serve a God who offers up God's self for us on a cross. We worship and serve a God who blesses us.



You are blessed beyond imagining, for you worship and serve a God who invites you to draw near to the heart of God. Who invites you to draw close to God and to live in God: the true, the everlasting, the *only* reality. Who has blessed you so that you can go out these doors and be a blessing!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.