

Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSVue)

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Blessed Are You

What we’ve read and been contemplating together this morning is probably something that you’ve heard before. You’ve likely heard a sermon on this before, too. These are a series of blessings that are probably familiar to many of you. These are known as the *Beatitudes*, which itself comes from the Latin word for “blessed.” It isn’t always my job to state the obvious, and I appreciate you bearing with me while I do, but I do think it’s important to recognize this fact: we know this. We’ve heard Jesus say this, and we’ve heard others talk about these blessings.

Would you please pray with me? ...

Now, for just a bit of context, Jesus has been led by the Spirit to the wilderness, tested by the devil,¹ withdrawn to Galilee,² gathered the first four of his disciples,³ and begun his public ministry, traveling all throughout the Galilee to teach in synagogues and proclaim the good news

¹ Matt 4:1-11

² Matt 4:12-17

³ Matt 4:18-22

and heal disease and sickness. He's attracting large crowds from all over the place: from Galilee, of course, and from Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan river. So great is his fame that people are coming from all over the world, essentially, to see this man and what he claims to say and do.

Now, Galilee was not the most happening place in the world. It wasn't a particular population hub; it wasn't a religious or intellectual center; there was no real political power in the region. It was essentially outside the mainstream, on the fringe of Israelite life. Perhaps a less charitable description of it is that it was a backwater, or a place that really wasn't all that important, impressive, or even all that culturally significant. I do want to be clear, I have nothing against this region of Israel; I actually have been there, and it's lovely. But being so far outside of the mainstream, there were many people from very different ethnic backgrounds in and around the Sea of Galilee, and so the area of Galilee was very diverse in terms of culture and religion. As such, it would have been easy for them to have been thought of as not being "Jewish" enough. They would have been considered unclean, having their cultures blended so, and they would therefore have been rejected by Pharisees and the priests of Jerusalem.

All this means that the people of Galilee, including Jesus who has lived here for some time according to earlier verses of Matthew, existed on the margins of Jewish society. And so out of this marginality comes Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, who is of God and sent *by* God to the world, that all the world might be saved.⁴ And so, now, even though his earthly ministry has technically already begun, Jesus goes up a mountain (just like another prominent Jewish figure) and delivers the Sermon on the Mount.

Although his ministry has already begun, according to Matthew, this sermon certainly begins Matthew's *account* of Jesus's ministry. It acts as the context, a preamble of sorts, for how Jesus will interpret the law, the things that he will do as a part of his ministry, and his rationale for doing so. He has been prepared for his ministry: he's been baptized, he's been tempted and tested, and called his disciples. He's even taught in the synagogues, proclaimed the good news, and healed the sick. And now, although he is surrounded by these crowds from all over the region, he speaks to his disciples. The crowds are there, and are almost certainly listening, but they aren't the direct audience of the sermon. And he begins with these *Beatitudes*, blessings to those who are in need of grace, of comfort, and of good news. Although Jesus is speaking to his disciples, it is these crowds who are listening that receive the divine favor, the blessings, that Jesus speaks of, which God has in store.

And if you think about it, "blessed" is honorific language. To be blessed is to be elevated, is to receive good things, is to be known as touched by the divine. What an honor that is! To be blessed, then, is to say "how honorable," or "full of honor" someone or something is, or to use any other language that elevates someone socially. Remember, also, that the people of Galilee were often looked down upon by those in power. These people, who are hearing these words and feeling this language deep in their own bodies, would have felt something different about this blessing, this "honor," than others. These people, who had received no honor from their own

⁴ John 3:17

society, are now being blessed by God. These statements of blessing ascribe honor to those unable to defend themselves, those who refuse to take advantage of others, those who refuse to trespass on the rights or positions of another. Instead of society, which rewards cutthroat living, selfish actions, and generally “getting ahead” of others, the honor to these meek, peacemaking, righteous-seeking, poor-in-spirit people comes from God.

Let’s take a look at who has received, or who God says deserves, this honor. The first people who are mentioned are the poor in spirit. For Matthew, these were not simply those who are cash poor, but those who were unable to keep their social position in society because of misfortune or injustice. A rich widow with no sons was still a “poor widow” regardless of how many assets, how much land or money, that she owned. She would be unable to defend her honor, she would be at risk of losing everything that she owned, that her husband had owned, because she was a woman who dared to live without a man in her life. Social misfortune, not economic misfortune, would make a person poor. Of course, economic hardship and oppression would also make a person poor, but this kind of poor person isn’t the only kind that Matthew is concerned with.

To be poor was to be unable to defend what was yours. To be poor was to fall below the status with which you were born. The poor are those who are not given honor. They’re socially weak. The rich are greedy, shamelessly strong, and are given honor in turn. The other side of that coin, in the same vein as the poor, is those who are unjustly persecuted and those who are falsely reviled. It is hard to be poor. I’m sure at least a few of us know that. Being poor, economically or spiritually, takes a heavy toll on one’s mental and spiritual health. Jesus is not romanticizing poverty. Rather, he is recognizing this fact. He is calling to light the reality that being poor corrodes and crushes the soul. At the same time, Jesus is emphasizing that God’s rule and work on earth is within and alongside the poor in spirit, in their struggle for justice be transforming the world.

Jesus’s speaking about those who are meek, who will inherit the earth, refers to those who are abused by the wicked while the wicked seem only to prosper. In Palestine, a land currently claimed and exploited by Rome for the benefit of the few, Jesus promises that God’s rule will reverse this. But the meek were still persecuted unjustly, falsely reviled, and cast aside.

So if persecution means losing what you were born with, being hated by others not for what you have done but for who you are, being driven out of your family, then of course they are also mourning for what they have lost. Of course, they also hunger and thirst, quite literally for food in addition to the justice and righteousness that they have been denied. So immediately, all of these things, these first few points of Jesus’s blessings come together: the meek, the lowly, the hungry and thirsty, those unable to defend themselves or to regain the status that was taken from them, which they had at birth. So the first four blessings go: blessed are those who are exploited, who are brought down low, for they will be elevated.

And then Jesus changes gears. He first refers to the merciful. Mercy is compassion, it’s forgiveness, shown toward someone who you don’t have to. It refers to those who have debts that they don’t need to repay: between parents and children, employers and employees, patrons

and clients, and others, who owe and are owed in turn. To be merciful is to be willing to repay those debts. And to those who do, God will do the same.

Then there are the pure of heart. Those who have their thinking and feeling attuned to what pleases God—in other words, those who have a conscience. Those who align themselves with the things that God cares about; these are the people who will see God. This is the language of a pilgrimage: to see God’s sanctuary at Jerusalem was the goal of pilgrims in those times. These joys and experiences are now available to any who has a pure heart.

And finally, there are the peacemakers: those who make peace. Peace is not just the absence of violence. This does not just refer to those who seek to end wars and division, but also to those who strive for whatever is necessary for meaningful human existence. So Jesus speaks to those around him, his disciples and the crowds through them: those who listen for the will of God, those who know their neighbors, who seek to grow more like what God calls them to be—they are the children of God. The ones who seek and create meaning in their lives and in the lives of others, for the benefit of *all* and not simply *a few*, these are the children of God.

All of these people that Jesus blesses and honors are the ones whom God blesses and honors. To them, Jesus promises a complete reversal of fortune. These are the people who will be filled, who will receive the kingdom of God, who are the children of God. Not the ones who have the power, who abuse their wealth and resources and those of others just to get ahead. Not the ones who step on others to get more-more-more. Jesus promises a better way to live, according to the scriptures and to the needs of others. In the present and in the future, Jesus promises that the people who have been taken advantage of, along with those who take advantage of them, will be reversed. The wicked will be removed from the land, as is written in Psalm 37, and the powerless and poor who lack will be given what they need to survive.

It’s easy for us this morning, in the comfort of our own homes, or in our pews, to hear Jesus’s words, but not react to them. We can say, in our heads, “Oh, that’s nice.” You know? To paraphrase a Monty Python film, “I’m glad someone mentioned the meek, they’re having a really hard time.” But let’s get one thing straight: to those people around Jesus, even to Jesus’s disciples themselves, this would have been felt in their bones. There is real, lived, embodied theology and spirituality in these blessings.

I invite you to think about what you might feel if Jesus said this to you today. Where would he say this? Wall Street? D.C.? Kyiv? Caracas? Bethlehem? Who would be the ones that he declares “blessed”? Who deserves the honor from God, according to Jesus?

I don’t have answers to these questions myself. But I do have ideas. I will say this: remember where Jesus was speaking in this story. Remember where Jesus lived, and how he lived. He did not live according to the rules of the day, but according to the rules of heaven. He did not live where he would be comfortable, where he would be set up for life. He’s already been offered all of that, the glamour and glory of being the Son of God, by the devil. Jesus turned that down. Because God does not call God’s children into a life of luxury. God calls us to live as Christ did: seeking peace, caring for others, and loving that which is of God with all that we are.

In this Sermon on the Mount, Christ invites us not only to see who is blessed, but to learn that those who are blessed are honored by God because of the way that they live.

They live according to the values of heaven, which we pray each week to be brought about on earth. Those who are blessed, who are honored by God, are those who remember who Christ was, and where Christ is today: Christ is on the margins of our society. Christ is on the side of the downtrodden, the poor in spirit, who cannot defend themselves. Christ is on the side of those making peace, not war. Christ is on the side of ending divisions, not deepening them. Christ is on the side of those who seek an end to such systems, on either side of it. And Christ empowers us to search for these blessings as we follow him.

Christ ends these blessings by saying, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for justice’s sake . . . when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” The life of a disciple of Jesus runs counter to the values of the world. It runs counter to the idea that someone unable to defend their honor, or who has been exploited to the point of despair, is not working hard enough. It runs counter to the idea that a person who is abused by others is weak, or that a person who shows mercy is foolish. A disciple’s life is not led according to the principles of the world that say that you only need to look out for number one, and everything else is extra. A disciple’s life is led according to the life of Christ, who says “Honor to the peacemakers, honor to those who are merciful.” Honor to you, blessed are you, Christ says, when you see this. Blessed are you, when you start living like this.

Instead of living as the world does, only looking out for ourselves, only ensuring that we are taken care of, Jesus instructs his disciples to live a better way. He invites them to live for others. And so, then, he invites you. What will you live for? How will we show that we are changed? For if we hunger and thirst for righteousness, if we seek the kingdom of God, if we strive for peace among all peoples, then we will certainly find it one day. Let us look together. For together, we are better. Together, we are blessed. Amen.