

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
"The beatitudes"

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-20

Opening Hymn: Hymn: "Oh for a thousand tongues to sing" #374

Closing Hymn: "Lord, the light of your love is shining" #376

Children's Hymn: "This little light of mine" (insert)

Choruses: Give me oil in my lamp, Jesus bids us shine, Thy Word.

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January 27, 2019

The Beatitudes

At the end of last week's passage, the Narrative Lectionary takes us from Jesus' temptation in the wilderness to the beginning of his ministry, saying "repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near". Let us remember that phrase, "repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near", it is important as we explore the teachings of Jesus referred to as the beatitudes.

I can remember my first encounter with the beatitudes. I was 10 or 11 years old and my sister came home from CGIT (Canadian Girls in Training) a Christian group for teenaged girls. She was all excited about the Beatitudes that they had studied that night. And she quoted:

"Happy are those who are poor as they will get their reward in heaven,

Happy are those who mourn as they will be comforted,

Happy are those who are meek as they will inherit the earth

Happy are those who hunger and thirst as they will be filled, . . ."

My reaction: Wait a minute, that doesn't sound right. Who is happy when they are poor? Nobody is happy when they are poor or mourning or

hungry. Okay, maybe the meek will inherit the earth; that is the plot of ground they are buried in as they are run over.

I didn't get it. Over time, I kept going back to them thinking that there was something I was missing. Maybe something is lost in translation from the original language, or the meanings of words have changed overtime. Every once in a while, I would get a glimpse of what these beatitudes might mean.

When my dad passed away, I felt God's presence comforting me in the times I really needed it. Sometimes I felt it as the presence of the Holy Spirit and other times it was one of his disciples with a friendly word or shoulder to cry on. I started to rethink "Happy are they who mourn as they will be comforted" but it wasn't "happy." So I thought maybe the better translation of the word is "blessed" and not "happy"?

Over time, I have gone back to explore the beatitudes, Matthew 5: 1-12, from different angles and perspectives. I'd like to share some of what I have discovered.

I have come to understand that I am not alone in being challenged to read the beatitudes as "How happy are" Going back the to original Greek, the word *makarios* can and does mean "happy." So, as a literal translation, it is correct. But happiness is a subjective state, a feeling, but in the beatitudes, Jesus is making an objective judgement on who receives God's favour. Jesus doesn't talk about the feeling we normally associate with the word "happiness", he talks about something deeper. Being "blessed" is not simply to be happy, but it is knowing that you are in God's favour. That

even when conventional security fails, blessedness still comes from recognizing God's presence and purposes. You are blessed because you know that God is working through your circumstances or promising to transform your situation--you are included in the realm of God, the Kingdom of Heaven.

Looking at Matthew 5: 1 – 12 with that understanding of the word "blessed", all of a sudden one can get a different meaning from the verses. It is not that one will be bubbly—a light and airy "happy" or that your current situation is a "happy" one; but you will have a deep abiding contentment and confidence in knowing one is secure in the coming kingdom, that the reign of God will restore your world.

Reading Matthew 5: 3 (NIV), "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Oh, not "bubbly happy" but content and confident. But what about "poor in spirit"?

Jesus could well have used the Aramaic word for "poor", but "the poor", God's poor, were a clearly defined group in the Hebrew (Old) Testament. The "poor" were not the poverty-stricken, they were the pious who—partly because they were needy, downtrodden, oppressed or in other ways afflicted—had placed their faith and hope in God.

Using this understanding, the first beatitude goes something like, "Content and confident are those who place their faith and hope in God for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That is a statement of fact and not a command. It is something that can be done, or at least strive to be done—to put our faith and hope in God. When put our faith and hope in God, we are

blessed. And it also states that the kingdom is here, not in the future in this case. Powerful!

In today's world, the prevailing sentiment is to stand our own two feet; to do it my way; rely on no one but myself. It is quite a shift to put our faith and hope in God instead. It is tempting to fall back on the adage of "God helps those who help themselves" as a compromise. But with compromises, you don't get the full end result either. Matthew 5:3 from the Message states it simply, "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and his rule." This first beatitude is foundational to the ones that follow.

Matthew 5:4, "Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted."

While mourning in Israel could refer to a broad spectrum of sadnesses, such as the death of a family member, throughout the Hebrew (Old) Testament it came to have a specialized meaning of mourning the brokenness of the community caused by sin or cruel outside forces. Just as individuals who go through a period of mourning after the death of a loved one as preparation for future living, the community mourns as preparation for the coming kingdom of God. If we use context, we can draw a conclusion that the promised comfort is not primarily for those who mourn the loss of a loved one, but it is those who mourn the loss of their innocence, their righteousness, their self-respect. Or more globally, seeing idolatry, injustice, exploitation and violence, and mourning. It is not the sorrow of bereavement to which Christ refers, but the sorrow of repentance. The mourners who bewail their own sinfulness and the sinful

world, will be comforted by the only comfort which can relieve their distress, namely the free forgiveness of God. In Isaiah 61, the Messiah was to be “the Comforter” who would “bind up the broken-hearted” and Christ does pour healing oil into our wounds and speak peace to our sore, scarred consciences. In this way, the mourning process includes repentance for individual or collective sins.

Building on the second beatitude, is the third, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

Today, we generally think of “the meek” as being weak and timid. Yet the Greek adjective means “gentle”, “humble”, “considerate”, and “courteous.” Meekness is humility toward God and toward others. It is having the *right* or the *power* to do something but refraining for the benefit of someone else. Paul urged meekness when he told us “to live a life worthy of the calling [we] have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” ([Ephesians 4:1–2](#)). So instead of the phrase “as meek as a mouse” which alludes to timidity, we should use the phrase “as meek as a lion” for the demonstration of restrained power which is the meaning here.

Meekness models the humility of Jesus Christ. As [Philippians 2:6–8](#) says, “[Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” Being “in the very

nature God,” Jesus had the right to do whatever He wanted, but, for our sake, He submitted to “death on a cross.” That is the ultimate in meekness.

Following on is the fourth beatitude, “Blessed are those who hungry and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Matthew 5:6)

Hunger and thirst are frequent human urges. They are also the body’s two most powerful urges. It’s immensely satisfying to eat a meal when starving or to drink of water when parched. The Bible often uses hunger and thirst to exemplify powerful desires:

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!...Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.” (Isaiah 55:1-2)

Jesus used these references in the Sermon on the Mount to communicate a blessed appetite for a particular pursuit: righteousness.

Biblical righteousness has three aspects: legal, moral and social. Legal righteousness is justification, a right relationship with God. Moral righteousness is that righteousness of character and conduct that is pleasing to God. Social righteousness, as we learn from the Law and the Prophets, is concerned with seeking humanity’s liberation from oppression, together with the promotion of civil rights, justice in the law courts, integrity in business dealings, and honour in home and family affairs. Being

righteous is not all that complicated; it means doing what is right. We have to have a passion to do what is right.

A life pursuing these qualities, without the proper motivation, sounds a little more Pharisaical than is comfortable. Upright, moral behavior is only righteous if it comes from a righteous heart, which is what Jesus regularly taught the Pharisees and anyone else who would listen.

Furthermore, we're told in Romans 1:17 that righteousness is achieved by faith alone: "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith.'" So why hunger and thirst for righteousness if we already have it by faith? How can we hunger for something we've already been given?

Colin Smith writes this of righteousness in *Momentum*:

The difference between the righteousness that Christ gives us and the righteousness to which He calls us is important to grasp...to all who are in Christ, God gives His Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts and creates within us a new and deep desire to live in a way that is pleasing to Him. Christ's people hunger and thirst for righteousness, because while we know that we are forgiven and accepted before God on the basis of all that Christ is and all that He has done, we also know how far we are from all that Christ calls us to be.

The Beatitudes are not directives in how to behave and conduct ourselves as Christians. They do not tell us to become poor in spirit, to mourn, to be

meek, and so forth. Rather, the Beatitudes are promises. I have only touched on the first four today. But each is related to the others, and they build on one another. For example, those who are meek, or humble, are more likely to hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they remain open to continued knowledge of God.

There are three principles for living into the spirit of the Beatitudes: simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion. These three principles allow us to be in the world, while not being totally shaped by it.

Let us pray: Gracious God, pour out your blessings upon us, not that we may be rich and famous, but that we may experience new life in your kingdom and be faithful to the purposes you have set before us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen