**Sermon Matthew 5:1-16 (Narrative Lectionary, NL123)**

MAIN POINT:

We live in a world that make The Beatitudes appear false. The word *beatitude* comes the Latin meaning ‘blessed.’ We see that word repeated 9 times throughout our reading. One commentary said that being ‘blessed’ means, being in the enviable position of receiving something for nothing. And that something is good. And if that something is acknowledged, received with open arms, open hands, it would eventually expand in and beyond the life of the receiver.

Our text today declares from the mountain top that, you are blessed. You are a recipient of God’s favor, of God’s love. You didn’t earn it. You didn’t past some test or minimum threshold. You are valued just as you are. You are worthy of good things, even when bad things happen…and they will happen. I wanted you to hear that truth (the main point) right out of the gate, precisely because we live in a world that make these blessings conditional, these beatitudes appear false. And so, we need to work hard to uncover their truth, let alone believe it. But let’s pray before we really get stuck in.

PRAYER:

Let’s pray:

Holy One, your Spirit moves in provocative ways. Though the forces of this world seek to undo or undermine humanity dignity, our dignity…in the life of Jesus, you shake things up. You turn things on their heads, you leave us surprised and inspired, assured of our inherent worth. So, open our senses now to the transformation that the blessings of your love can bring today. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Every culture has its own definition of success. In Jesus’s time, it would probably feature freedom from domineering rulers, oppressive tax collectors, and capricious soldiers. It might well include the respect that comes from savvy negotiating skills in the marketplace. In the Near East –ancient and modern– the list would certainly include the ability to provide for one’s household and having one’s family enjoy health and prosperity.

Every culture promotes some vision of what happiness looks like. In America today, the list would also include health, prosperity, and the ability to provide for one’s family. *In addition*, our society has long promoted the goals of accumulating wealth and amassing power. Individual freedom is high on the list. As is, the respect of one’s neighbors and colleagues. Popularity, recognition, and prestige are also lifted up as worthy of pursuit.

Political debates assume that disparagement and condescension are appropriate tools to use in the pursuit of happiness. So-called reality television runs on the premise that everyone wants to have their 5 minutes of fame. Lifestyle magazines promote virility and ambition, perfect beauty, and ideal relationships. Trade magazines promote financial success, time management skills and how to get the promotion. Sports magazines promote strategies to win and to exploit the weaknesses in our opponent.

*This* is why Jesus’ list of blessings is so jarring. *This* is why *The Beatitudes*; these blessings appear false. Our world morphs and disfigures the blessings declared here, reducing this sacred concept to nothing more than a platitude, the result of positive (or maybe delusional) thinking. Our culture assumes that only a life with no problems *is* a #blessed life. But that is not what this text says.

And so, I’ll say it again: You *are* blessed. You have been gifted with God’s favor, goodness, and love. You *are* imbued with inherent worth and value, no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey. And that blessing, that *good* gift has the potential to grow. And, to borrow the images of salt and light from the following verses, that good gift (of knowing one’s inherent worth) has the potential to *season* and *illuminate* those around us. There’s a reason that the Gospel writer put these two passages back-to-back. Good gifts are not to be hidden away, unseen, and untasted. So, let’s take a whirlwind tour of these blessings:

THE BLESSINGS

The first beatitude blesses “those at the end of their rope.” I hope you enjoyed Eugene Peterson’s interpretation as much as I have. The NRSV says it in perhaps a more familiar way: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The Message says, “With less of you there is more of God” and more of God’s rule. Our culture says, happy are those with great prospects for marriage and work, because they will be seen as successful, of having it all together. Blessed are the *rich* in things, and in self-assurance. BUT Jesus says, happy are the destitute, the poor in spirit, those at the end of their rope, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

The second beatitude blesses those who have lost what is most dear to them. The ones who mourn, the ones for whom grief has changed everything. In a culture that says, happy are those whose loved ones enjoy health, who are untouched by loss or illness. BUT Jesus says happy are people who grieve because they will be comforted by the embrace of the Divine One, and they *will* be made glad.

The Third Beatitude refers to the meek who will inherit the earth. Our culture says, happy are those who enjoy power because they will be in charge. Happy are people who can buy any pleasure because they can do whatever makes them feel good. BUT here, it is the ones who are truly humble, the ones who are content with just being themselves –no more no less. It is they that will inherit the earth and find themselves in possession of everything that cannot be bought.

The Fourth, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” or as we heard today, those who have “worked up a good appetite for God” for they will be filled, fed until they are full. That lingering dissatisfaction, yearning for something more, will be met with complete contentment. In our culture, contentment is illusive, forever out of reach. That’s how advertising works: products, vacations, the health and beauty industry, the luxury car, the latest cellphone, the bigger house. But blessed are those who hunger for more than the material, for they will find contentment.

The Fifth, “Blessed are the merciful,” the ones who care, who make someone else’s life easier, or another person’s burden lighter, for they will in turn receive mercy, *they* will be cared for. In a culture that would have us believe that if we don’t look after “Number 1” no one will.

The Sixth Beatitude, “Blessed are the *pure* in heart,” the ones who work on their character defects, go to therapy, who seek spiritual direction, who disentangle themselves from the toxicity of their work environments and the dysfunction of their families, rather than perpetuating hurt and suffering…because they’ll see God. They’ll have their visions tuned, adjusted, so that every person is seen as an image-bearer of the Divine. They will see that God’s presence is found in every circumstance no matter how dire, and that God’s love *is* boundless and far-reaching, even to the parts of ourselves that seem the most unlovable, untouchable, unredeemable.

The Seventh Beatitude blesses those who make peace, those who meditate and cooperate rather than run down their opponent by whatever means possible. Blessed are those who are active in engaging peace that brings wholeness, not the false peace that seeks to silence the suffering and keep them in their place. For they will be called God’s children, part of God’s family.

The final two-part Beatitude focusses on “those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” or as Peterson says, those whose “commitment to God” or commitment to the values of the loving, inclusive, *just* kin-dom “provokes persecution.”

Let this blessing put fire in your belly, as we work to resource food pantries in our area, fund organizations that provide shelter and help for those with HIV, or youth made homeless because of their sexuality. Let this blessing spur you on in the work of reproductive justice, particularly as Kentucky remains one of the states with the most restrictive anti-abortion laws in the nation, not to mention the slate of anti-trans house bills up for discussion this term. You are blessed when your commitment to God’s Ways, means that human rights are not up for discussion. You are blessed when you resist the forces of exclusion and poverty in our society. For the kin-dom of heaven is already yours.

MAIN POINT AGAIN

Friends: You are blessed. You have been gifted with God’s favor and goodness, gifted with inherent worth and love, with peace and power, *even* in your spiritual deprivation, *even* in your emotional distress. God’s love and you’re worth cannot be lessened or taken away even *when* you feel inadequate or can list your every moral shortcoming. You are blessed.

INTERLUDE

In each of the beatitudes there is a **reversal** of what the world and our culture might think is the way to receive blessing, gain success or happiness. When Eugene Peterson speaks about The Beatitudes, he refers to a story about Isaac in Genesis 26. When Isaac settled in the land that God had showed him Isaac discovered that the wells his father Abraham had dug to access water, for the people and their livestock, had been filled up by the Philistines. So, Isaac set about the hard work of re-digging those wells, so that he too would have life in that place. Peterson suggests that Jesus has dug wells for us –wells of life and liberation. But they have become filled up with all kinds of cultural and religious junk and false promises. The Beatitudes, Peterson suggests, are a way that we re-dig those wells in order to access the blessings of life and liberation again.

BLESSINGS EXPAND

The pastor I served alongside in Tennessee, Rev. Mack Strange used to say, the life of faith is learning how to live with an open hand rather than a closed fist. That:

* As long as our fists are clenched with grasping and keeping, they aren’t opened to give with generosity or receive with gratitude.
* As long as our arms are crossed with pride and self-sufficiency, they aren’t opened to embrace others when tragedy strikes, and we lose those we love.
* As long as we tightly close our fingers, gripping our own wealth and sense of power, they aren’t opened to lend a hand to another, when they are hungry or need assistance.

Our effectiveness as disciples, or our own sense of happiness or blessing, does *not* depend on our success according to the world’s standards. [SLOW DOWN HERE]

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[PAUSE]

INVITATION TO SILENCE

We have a short time of silence that I’ll mark the beginning and end of by ringing the singing bowl.

*In this time,* I’m not inviting you into some kind of delusional thinking. We all come to this space and time with *real* lives, *real* problems, *real* hurts, and losses. Multiple experiences that undermine our sense of worthiness and purpose in this world.

So, perhaps during this time, you read over the scripture again. Let the words of blessing wash over you. May you feel a kinship with others in this sanctuary. May you be surrounded by love and acceptance, just as you are. You *are* blessed.

[STEP DOWN TO RING THE SINGING BOWL x3 times]