

January 29, 2017
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Matthew 5:1-12

Remember the Blessing

I forgot the blessing at the end of worship last Sunday. After the communion blessing, I came around the altar for the sending blessing and I couldn't remember how it begins, this blessing this time of year, when worship is replete with themes of light and ends with a blessing of God Almighty sending light and truth, all the days of our lives... (I'm rehearsing it, so I don't get forget again.) No one pointed this mistake out to me, except the Holy Spirit, giving us a gospel this week that is all about blessing, a text often referred to by the Latin word for blessings, "The Beatitudes."

Some context about where The Beatitudes fit into Matthew's gospel. It's chapter five, relatively early in a story that is twenty eight chapters long. Just last week in chapter four we heard how Jesus began calling his first disciples, but we didn't really hear what that meant, what the following entailed. Today we get more content. After inviting people to follow, Jesus now tells them to sit down, and he teaches them.

This emphasis on teaching is a key part of Matthew's gospel. If you look at its twenty eight chapters as a whole it turns out that it has several long teaching sections within it; continuous long quotes from Jesus. As it happens, there are five such sections, just like there are five books of Torah, the Pentateuch. These five teaching sections in Matthew sometimes span several chapters, but they can be picked out by their beginnings and endings, because each starts and ends with the same linguistic markers, that act as bookends. At the start there's: "Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying..." We heard that today, it's a cue: listen, the teacher is about to speak. And they all end with: "After saying these things..." Also a cue, reflect on what you've learned. We'd have to read through all of Matthew five and chapters after to hear that ending cue, to complete this first long teaching section, which is known in its entirety as "The Sermon on the Mount." We'll hear more excerpts Sermon on the Mount in the next few weeks; today's reading, the Beatitudes, are its introduction.

It's a surprising introduction. Perhaps this is why Jesus has the listeners sit down—not so much because it was going to be a long sermon, but because it begins by upending all we've come to expect about how things are. It's almost as if Jesus begins to teach his followers by saying: "Congratulations, you've just lost the lottery." Or "Congratulations, you who have it rough." Or, "Congratulations, you who are in a terrible situation." Jesus begins this first, foundational presentation of what being his disciple is all about, by naming and blessing circumstances, conditions, people, who are not usually considered fortunate: the poor, the meek, those who mourn.

This is a surprising thing to say in the time and culture when Jesus first taught. In the ancient world if you were just scraping by, if you were sick, if someone close to you died, that meant there was something wrong with you. You had bad things happening to you? You were in a bad place? In the ancient worldview, it was your fault, and you were a person to be avoided, not positively acknowledged. People who were doing well, on the other hand, people who were well-off, people who were healthy, wealthy and wise—that was considered a sign of divine favor.

But no, that's not how God sees things, Jesus says. The blessing that Jesus announces is very different from how blessing was understood in that culture and time. And in our culture, today. We may think we have outgrown pre-modern worldviews, but for all of our Enlightenment, we still attend to people who seem to have it all. Personally prospering? Looking great? Just won a big contest? Hashtag blessed? Not according to the Beatitudes.

Here's another thing the Beatitudes don't say, which, I think, is equally surprising, or even more surprising. Here is yet another way the Beatitudes say something counter to how we often try to understand things, especially when things aren't so good. The Beatitudes do not say that it's all just a matter of perspective. This way of thinking has ancient and modern equivalents as well. In the ancient world, you might hear something like this from the philosophers known as the Stoics, who said there are no good or bad events, there's only perception. We have modern variations of this as well: mind over matter, it's all in how you look at things—so it's up to you to look at them in a good way, a happy way.

I gravitate towards this, sometimes as a stoic, sometimes as a cheerleader. It's telling though, how it's often those people, including me, it's often those with privilege who who preach an optimist outlook, who say pull yourself up, who counsel that it's not what you have, but how you think about what you have. But that's not what the Beatitudes say. Jesus does not say, "Your life may be bad, but if look at it differently, it's not so bad." Jesus does not tell the poor in spirit to smile. Jesus does not declare that the meek simply lack self-esteem. And Jesus does not say to those who mourn, "chin-up." God Almighty is too committed to truth for that, God Almighty is too much the truth for that. There are bad events; it's not just a matter of perception. The Beatitudes are not the "Be happy attitudes."

That unfortunate phrase has a memorable ring to it, but it's wrong. If it's now stuck in your head, remember too that it's not what the Beatitudes are. The Beatitudes are not about how we look at things, but how God does. In the Beatitudes, God says, "You who suffer, you are seen. You are seen by God. And you are more than your current situation. You are more than the worst thing that has ever happened to you, or by you. And you will be more than that. You will be comforted. You will be filled. You will be called children of God." The Beatitudes are not a paean to the power of positive thinking, they are pronouncement and promise.

It is all too easy to forget that. I forget that. I get distracted, or depressed. I forget the blessing God gives, not because of what we have or do, but because of what we lack and need. I forget that God tells us that for those in darkness there is blessing, it will happen, it's not up to us but we can be part of it. We too can raise a lamp, like the Statue of Liberty raises a lamp, like the poem at its bases says, a poem so Beatitude like: "Give me your tired, your poor..." We called to be blessings, by being merciful, by being peacemakers, by being hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Remember that.