

Kingdom of Blessing
Menno Mennonite Church
June 19, 2022

Purpose: To welcome the new blessing of God's kingdom in our lives.

Message: We are invited to think differently about who we are called to be as disciples of Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-16, Micah 6:1-8 (Please read/have read)

Synopsis: As accustomed as we are to Christian culture and living, we occasionally forget what is being said, and how different it can sound from the world as usual. We often think of the Beatitudes as a code of behavior—be meek to inherit the earth, be pure in heart in order to see God. It is stuff we do in order to satisfy God.

Instead, here as Jesus begins his ministry to and with the disciples, he is starting by speaking to what REAL blessing looks like, drawing the contrasts between the blessings of the world as usual and the blessings of the kingdom of God. As disciples, we are being asked to realign our expectations in accord with the way of the kingdom, moving away from the priorities of the world, to be salt and light as part of the kingdom.

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Matthew 5:1-16 NRSV

1 When Jesus saw the crowds,
he went up the mountain;
and after he sat down,
his disciples came to him.

2 Then 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 righteousness' sake,
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.

13 "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste,
how can its saltiness be restored?
It is no longer good for anything,
but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,
but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

16 In the same way, let your light shine before others,
so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father in heaven.

We all have our sayings. You know, those clever little blurbs that reside in our heads, ready to be offered at the merest prompting. They are the cultural clichés. They are second nature. Fill in the blank with me: Slow and steady //wins the race. Cheaters never//prosper/win. A stitch in time//saves nine. A penny saved//is a penny earned. Do unto others//as you would have them do unto you. Spare the rod//spoil the child. Six of one//half dozen of the other. I am sure that we have plenty more where that came from, probably even in any number of languages. These are the slogans of our lives that become part of us as they represent their wisdom to us, a small touchstone ready to hand to prompt us to right behavior in their wisdom. That or we have simply heard them so many times in our lives that their sheer repetition won't let the notion out of our heads, even if we wanted them to depart. They might not mean a whole lot to us, but there they are all the same.

For the most part, we put these words of Jesus in the same category. These are good, aspirational thoughts, but don't speak much about actual life or living in a relevant way. In Sunday School growing up I was encouraged to have "a Beatitude Attitude" urging us to maintain the prescription of outlook in order to maintain our blessing, more easy to remember rhymes of how to achieve a good life and living. Be meek because the meek will be blessed; be merciful because it is in your self-interest to find mercy and so forth. If you happen to mourn now, worry not because you will be comforted in time. All of which is a good idea, and good advice-- a good way to be in the world for what that is worth. Finding the good in the situations of life is an important lesson. But I just not sure that easy words of comfort is the full extent of what Jesus had in mind here. What if these words were launching a way of looking at the world that is substantively different than anything we have seen before? What if Jesus was trying to reframe our values of what is good in the world; not just to support us in maintaining our sunny disposition within a sometimes-cloudy existence?

I come to wonder this in study of these words, some of which I had not actually noticed too well before. Like these are really the first actual teachings that Jesus delivers in the gospel according to Matthew. Jesus speaks before this, but mostly in dialog—with John the Baptist at the river, with Satan in the wilderness, with the newly minted disciples as he called them to leave what they had and follow him. He was around, healing, and ministering to the people of Galilee, however this is the first recorded teaching and shaping the ministry he was undertaking. Think of the Sermon on the Mount which the Beatitudes are part of as the inaugural address of the

kingdom of God. With that in mind, the beatitude can be thought of as the preamble, setting out the parameters and expectations of what is to come after. It was the beginning of a new way of being in the world, of seeing the way of God and the working of God with us and leading us forward.

Not that this is easy, or in any way obvious. We know that it is rare that these values hold up to a rough and tumble world. We are living days where the world seems less inclined to be governed by the valuation of the qualities of meekness, peacemaking, and purity of heart and intent than the low levels we are generally accustomed to. While I am guessing this is the assessment of every generation for the next, that doesn't mean the feeling is not relevant. We are seeing the cynicism of the way of the world which blesses power at all costs as the way to subdue the world, peace as a function of military and cultural might and not costly compromise and loving response; that sees those who struggle in their poverty be it material or spiritual as those who can be discarded, mocked, and run over. Those that show mercy are weak. Those that hunger after righteousness are suckers to be exploited. And if we think ourselves persecuted, reviled, or put upon in any way is more a cause for a lawsuit and restraining order than it is any recognition of patient blessing. Again, there is nothing new about this state of affairs. Yet with our ability to speak our minds and publish our thoughts to each other, and critique the other without the benefit or cost of relationship in the shape of social media has opened a new chasm that we are only beginning to navigate our way through.

None of which would have come as a surprise to Jesus. I think these words of blessing are given to the newly minted disciples because they depict the basic conflict between the values of the kingdom and those of the world in full demanding detail. Right up front, Jesus is offering and understanding of what it means to be a disciple and to follow after him by laying out the defining values of the Kingdom for them, and the consequences of being in league with the way of Christ. When you take on the characteristics of Christ, placing yourself at the service of those who God loves (the world) in the way that God loves—gently, openly, without bluff or guile, you may need some guidance to understand the world in which you now live. Anyone who had made major change in their life can attest to this—when you change, it often the people who are closest to you that are most resistant, and there are consequences. As I have I walked with people who have worked the 12 steps the story is always the same: there will be those who are unwilling to rejoice that even a positive change is being made, or worse yet violently resistant to

the change that is being made. Being the church people that we are, this movement to the way of the kingdom is something less of a contrasting decision than joining in with that which has always been, that is not always as clear to us, but it is real. Perhaps the beatitudes are like a pharmaceutical ad; “possible side effects of following Christ include mourning, rejection by the powers that be, persecution, rumor mongering, and dry mouth.”

It is not so much the disclaimer the Jesus is giving here though than what I think is he is speaking of truly matters, of where blessing is ultimately housed. Our blessing is not dependent on that which we do, or how we are assessed by the world around us, he seems to say, but by who you follow in faith and the faithful, resilient hope that defines the kingdom of God that defines the kingdom of God. He was telling these people who had left their homes, livelihoods, families, friends and all the things that make up life as we know it that they are blessed, not because they are rich, successful, powerful or wise. He is defining identity as kingdom citizens as what matters above all else.

The world as we know it is not the world as it ultimately, fully is. The grief, pain and anxieties of life and living will not have the final word, as powerful as they may be. God’s kingdom works beyond the ways of the world or any swoon of political fortunes, no matter how dizzying. God’s love cares about those who mourn for a life they wish they had, or all that they lost. The risks of stepping out to meet an enemy not in the field of battle but at the table of peace will be rewarded. That when people do not understand why we would want to retain hope and resist the powers and principalities of this world, we do not do so out of personal conviction or internal strength; we do so because we follow Jesus into the world the God loves, and are called only to love faithfully ALL people, even when that love proves costly to ourselves. In all this we are blessed. Not because we have achieved, behaved, gained, or comprehended the deep truths about Jesus. But simply because we have stepped out on the road and followed faithfully where Jesus leads.

Our allegiance lies in Christ. That in and of itself is a blessing. That in and of itself offers us the tools to alter our mindset from the world as we know it, and to be offered the world as we understand it to be—the world of the kingdom of God, which is already here, yet coming still. Do we feel our blessing frequently, readily, or easily? Of course not. We are living in the in between times—with one foot in our world and one foot in the next. We feel the oddity of the meek and the pain of loss just as fiercely and fully as anyone else. It is not fun to be “the other”

who stands up for the unpopular in the name of Christ. We are in the midst of struggling with what a follower of Christ looks like and the characteristics of the kingdom ought best be lived. It is the work of every generation as we take up the work of building the kingdom each in our own way.

That's where we start. The same place the disciples started: we are blessed because we are loved by God. And in that love, we are called to live the values of the kingdom the best ways we know how. These values are the basics of the kingdom that Jesus is laying out in the sermon on the mount. This is the way of God and in that, and that alone resides our blessing. That is our founding truth, and no one can change that. This is our enlivening hope, for which we are grateful. This is our ongoing challenge, and from this all else comes in blessing.

With the beatitudes we are given the way of the kingdom, and in that we are challenged and formed. But most of all we are blessed. May this be an encouragement, our hope, and our promise, in these and days to come. Amen.