First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

1/29/23

You’re Blessed

Matthew 5:1-12 NRSV

**5**When Jesus[a] 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[b] 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.

This opening act, of the Sermon on the Mount, serves as some of the most familiar words Jesus would speak during his ministry. These words are so familiar, in fact, that even non-Christians can quote at least a few of these. But, there’s some interesting differences in this particular passage, that you rarely find in subsequent teachings of Jesus.

So, question, what makes these words different from other words Jesus spoke? What, if anything, do you think might be is missing from this passage? I asked the Tuesday night Bible study this question, and I’ll pose it to you as well. When we look at the Beatitudes, what’s not included, here? (OK, Bible study folks, y’all know where I’m going with this, so hush up now and don’t give it away :-)

There are two things that differentiate this passage from most of the other teachings of Jesus. First, it’s the use of the third person plural. “Blessed are they/those…” We’re much more accustomed to hearing Jesus speak in the second person to individuals or groups, so this can seem a bit jarring. It’s only when we get to verse 11, that Jesus switches back to second person. The second and, in my opinion, more important difference here, is the fact that Jesus isn’t commanding anyone to do anything. That’s what’s missing here. Yes, that’s right, there’s nothing Jesus is commanding us to do, in this passage; at least not directly.

Instead, Jesus is drawing a contrast between the religious and political powers that dominated life, in his day, and with those who were often victimized by those who had the ability to exercise that power. He’s pointing out that the ones who are blessed are the marginalized, the downtrodden and those who are oppressed.

Tod Lindberg, an adjunct professor at Georgetown University, and the author of The Political Teachings of Jesus, describes the Beatitudes this way:

*From the beginning of his career, Jesus understood clearly the high stakes involved in his political teaching. Here Jesus proposes a different hierarchy. To see whom, he elevates in the Beatitudes, it may be helpful to conjure a list of qualities opposite to the ones he lists. Cumulatively, what emerges from this collection of “anti-Beatitudes” is a portrait of a privileged class, one that sees those below as essentially inferior. For “the poor in spirit,” the opposite number might be someone arrogant in his righteousness and sense of superiority. For “those who mourn,” we can substitute those whom the world has given cause for rejoicing. For “the gentle,” the overbearing. For “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” we may find a contrast in those who are complacent on account of their privileges and defend them vigorously. For “the merciful,” the unforgiving, perhaps the cruel: those who, when they have an advantage over another, even a temporary one, don’t hesitate to exploit it. Opposite “the pure in heart” are those who are cunning in pursuit of their private gain. Opposite “the peacemakers” are those who act to create or aggravate conflict. Opposite “those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness” are those doing the persecuting, as opposite “you when people insult you . . . because of me” are those seeking to put down Jesus’s teaching and those who follow it.*

I love the phrase “anti-Beatitudes,” and how Lindberg uses it to help us understand just how radical the Beatitudes really are. To my way of thinking, Lindberg explanation makes sense, and serves as a rather biting commentary on the political and religious realities of Jesus’ time and, unfortunately, our own as well. But we’re still viewing this through the lens of third person. And that leaves an opening here for many folks to sit back, cluck their tongues, and bemoan the state of our world, without having to do anything about.

But, I wonder what happens when we change “Blessed are They,” to “You’re Blest?” That’s exactly what we see in The Message translation, and I’m going to share some of that with you, starting at verse 3 and going through verse 10:

***3****“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.*

***4****“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.*

***5****“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.*

***6****“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.*

***7****“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.* ***8****“You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.* ***9****“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.* ***10****“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.*

That puts an entirely different spin on it, doesn’t it? All of a sudden, it becomes much more personal. We are no longer on the outside, hearing about how others are blest. As an aside, I’ve mentioned before that there are parts of The Message translation that I struggle with; just ask me about how The Message translates the parable of the Fig Tree, if you want to see my eyes roll back in my head. But I think this translation of the Beatitudes is spot on.

So, do you think we can just leave it there? Ummm, no I don’t think so. There’s definitely a plot twist coming.

When we understand that we are the ones being blessed; when we realize that we’re the ones Jesus is speaking about, what happens then? Do we shout “YAY, thanks God!” and leave it there? While it is important to give thanks to God for the blessings, if we stop there, the job is only half done, in my humble opinion.

When we truly understand that we are blessed, I believe we must use that knowledge, and the understanding that we are no longer spectators in this story, in order to be a blessing to others. We have a responsibility to lift up the downtrodden, to stand with those on the margins, to advocate for those who society and the church consider beyond help or salvation. And this is where verses 11 and 12 comes into play, because when we lift up the downtrodden, when we stand with those on the margins, and when we advocate for those who seem beyond help or redemption, we are challenging those very real, very current political and religious structures designed to maintain power for the few.

It’s been my experience that most of the time those who hold power in society and in the church, will not give up that power easily or willingly. Jesus understood this and knew that opposing the power of religious and political leadership was, and still is, going to result in trouble for those who challenge the status quo. Jesus knew this and offers hope for those willing to take those risks. Let me read how the Message, translates verses 11 and 12. They read, *“…Count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”*

So, when you look at the blessings offered by the Beatitudes, which ones resonates with you? My guess is that there will be more than one that you’ll relate to. Are you blessed because you were poor in spirit and someone lifted you up? Are you blessed because someone comforted you when you mourned? Are you blessed because someone cared for you?

I invite you to find which of these blessings resonates most with you. I invite you to understand that Jesus’ words aren’t meant for someone else, but for each and every one of us. I invite you to give thanks to God for the blessings that these words offer you and everyone else, and I invite you to use these words as a roadmap in order to be a blessing to others, even when it gets you in trouble. AMEN