

Sermon Beautiful Vision Beatitudes # 1 Matt. 5: 1-12 January 30, 2010 Rev. Thomas L. Hall, Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO 80222 (# 1 in Series on Sermon on the Mount)

Question for you? What is a good life? What does it look like? Who is a good person?

These questions are answered in what has become known as The Sermon on the Mount. Of course we know that a life lived in the life of God will be a good life. But who is and who is not assured of such a life can cause confusion. It did in Jesus' time and still does. So, who, according to Jesus, has the good life?

This isn't an idle question. Some have thought that by focusing on the Beatitudes they can be more religious. If the scripture says that it will be the poor in spirit, who will be blessed and receive the kingdom of heaven, those who mourn and those who are meek, for they will inherit the earth, and the merciful will receive mercy and the pure in heart for they will see God, and the peacemakers, for they'll be called children of God, then what must I do to be those things. What must I do to be meek, poor in spirit, merciful, a peacemaker?

Unfortunately this is the manner in which the Beatitudes are traditionally understood. These are not characteristics of what it means to be a Christian.

What's so shocking about today's passage from Matthew is that it sounds like it is full of typos — even when it is completely accurate. When you read this stuff, it is so counter-intuitive that you figure that there must be a misprint here.

“Blessed are the meek”? The meek? I don't think so!

The only way to see these words clearly is through the lens of the kingdom of God. A proofreader's magnifying glass cannot help us to spot the truth here — we need to be looking through the divine optics of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus Christ. “Blessed are the poor in spirit” ... “Blessed are those who mourn” ... “Blessed are the peacemakers” ... these are not prescriptions from the self-help section of your local Borders bookstore. Instead, they are statements of what is true about the new reality that the Lord is inscribing on the world.

There are no typos here. Only the God's-honest truth.

So what can we learn from these counterintuitive realities? For starters, we need to realize that these blessings, known as the Beatitudes, are not descriptions of human feelings. When Jesus says that we are “blessed,” he is not saying that we are necessarily “happy.” To be reviled and persecuted because you follow the Lord might turn out to be a blessing (v. 11), but it is not going to make you feel particularly cheerful. The nine Beatitudes which Jesus proclaims in this passage are so much more than nine “be-happy-attitudes.”

To be blessed, in this case, is to be made privileged or fortunate by the action of Almighty God. It carries with it a sense of salvation and peace and well-being. You might say that the opposite of blessed is not “unhappy.” Rather, the opposite of blessed is “cursed.” To be blessed is to be given the gift of divine favor, a gift that we all have a deep human hunger to receive.

Stated this way, it's clear that the blessing of the Beatitudes is not about us, and it's not about how we feel. Instead, it's all about what God has done for us.

With this perspective in mind, we can get a clearer sense of what Jesus is talking about when he describes his disciples as “blessed.” What he is saying is that these former fishermen are blessed because they are experiencing the coming of God’s kingdom, and they are in the process of discovering that their lives are being reshaped by this new reality. No longer will the meaning of life be defined by the culture of the town of Capernaum, or the expectations of their extended families, or the size of the fish being pulled out of the Sea of Galilee. From now on, the dominant reality in their existence will be the kingdom of God, and the blessing of God will come to all who make a place for this kingdom in their lives.

When you think about it, there was some truth in the typo that read “Blessed are the place-makers.” Blessed are those who make a place for the kingdom of God.

So, what does it mean for us to make a place for the kingdom in our lives today? What kind of blessing will we experience if we allow ourselves to be transformed by the radical new reality that Jesus offers us? What kind of renewal will come our way if we take seriously the invitation to open our hearts and minds to the arrival of God’s kingdom?

We might discover, for example, that we are “poor in spirit” (v. 3) — a term that describes people who find their true identity and security in the One Lord God. The poor in spirit are blessed as a result of the kingdom of God being available to them in their spiritual poverty. Note that Jesus didn’t say “blessed are the poor in spirit because they are poor in spirit. There is nothing weak or pathetic or shameful about being poor in spirit, but instead it means that we are not deluded enough to think that we are masters of the universe and in complete control of our lives. This spiritual poverty is really an excellent quality to have in this post-9/11 world of terrorist threats, international tension and economic uncertainty — it means that we are dependent on God, first and foremost, and that the Lord will reward us with the gift of his kingdom.

Let’s make a place for being poor in spirit.

We might also find that we are among “those who mourn” (v. 4) — people who feel grief as we look around and see pain and crying, suffering and dying. We mourn because there is evil in us and around us, erupting in bedrooms and boardrooms, back alleys and battlefields. There are temptations all around us, and weaknesses deep within us, that make it an everyday struggle to follow the Lord in faith. But the promise of today’s passage is that this grim and often grotesque reality is not the final chapter of human history — there is going to be an unexpected twist in the tale with a turn toward love and peace and justice. God is writing a surprise ending to this story, and he invites each of us to play a part by doing what we can to live by the values of Christ’s kingdom.

If we do, we’ll be given a sense of comfort we never dreamed possible. We’ll find ourselves blessed, not cursed.

Perhaps we are also what Jesus calls “the meek” (v. 5) — gentle people who are trying to reject the power-hungry and violent ways of the world we live in.

Or we are men and women who hunger and thirst for righteousness (v. 6) by actively doing the will of God.

Maybe we are “pure in heart” (v. 8), willing to show the world in word and deed that there is nothing more life-changing than single-minded devotion to God.

Or we are “merciful” (v. 7), showing others the very gift that we are so anxious to receive for ourselves. Our God is the God of mercy. True mercy grows not out of some intrinsic human goodness, but from our acceptance and acknowledgement of God's mercy. Those who discern that God is merciful are freed, themselves, to be merciful. There were undoubtedly people on that hillside who came away feeling blessed and honorable. That is undoubtedly why we are gathered here today. The people who were on that long ago hillside went out and told others about this blessing of God's, and so we are blessed. The realm of heaven is there today for those who follow Jesus without delay.

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Be merciful. This is the one good idea we have been given so far. We are promised that if we place mercy at the center of all that we do and say we will be blessed and honored.

These are not mistakes or misspellings, as strange as they look to us. Instead, they are kingdom-based qualities that can open the door to inner peace and everlasting salvation.

The Beatitudes opens the kingdom of God to everyone. The Beatitudes express the attitude we are to have, to share, to experience, just as Jesus had, shared, experienced and lived. The kingdom of God is seen in these blessings.

Let's make a place for them. The challenge for us is to open ourselves to God's kingdom, and receive this radical new reality that Jesus is inscribing on our hearts and thus making a place for the Beatitudes. Blessed are those who open the door to the kingdom of God, says Jesus — blessed are the placemakers. That's no typo.