Bless Your Heart!

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany 2020

Matthew 5:1-12

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: Blessed are you. . . Matthew 5:1-2*

 Finally. Finally, finally, finally. The lectionary writers have favored us with a word of comfort, assurance, and well, blessedness. Matthew 5:1-12, known familiarly as *The Beatitudes*, is one of the passages we look to again and again for comfort and assurance. The word “beatitude” simply means “blessing,” the word that Jesus repeats throughout the passage. These words are often read at the hospital bed, at funerals and gravesides. We love these words and are inspired by them.

Many of you know I did most of my graduate studies in the southern US, specifically North Carolina and Georgia. Besides their unique vocalizing of the Queen’s English, southerners utilize some delightful homespun phrases that capture meaning in colorful ways, like *he drank so much coffee he was a jittery as a cat on a hot tin roof; or, He’s so stuck up he thinks the sun comes up just to hear him crow. Or,* about being cheap*, He squeezes a quarter so tight the eagle screams.*

 Southerners sure have a way with words! One of the most common phrases they use is to say “Well, bless your heart!” when they want to express gratitude for something you’ve done for them. You do or say some kindness to a southerner and she may have the tendency to say, *Well, bless your heart!* I must admit that that phrase has become a part of my vocabulary.

 But when Jesus pronounces the blessings in the Beatitudes, he does not speak a word of gratitude. The Common English Bible, which I use most often, translates the word as “happy.” That probably gets to the meaning more closely, but even “happy” connotes something less than what it means. A while back, I differentiated in a sermon the difference between “happiness” and “joy.” Happiness is something dependent upon the circumstances one finds oneself in, or what happens to us. For example, I will be very happy if the San Francisco Forty-niners win the Super Bowl later today. In fact, I will be euphoric. Joy, on the other hand, is something deeper, something more lasting and not dependent upon the contingencies of life.

 So, I may be more satisfied if I translate the passage, “Full of joy are those. . .” That gets at Jesus’ intent, I believe.

 But there is one other thing I want you to notice in the blessings Jesus pronounces: they are so countercultural. They are countercultural today as much as they were when Jesus spoke these words some two thousand years ago.

Part of what makes the Beatitudes so counter-intuitive is that Jesus pronounces God’s blessing on those who expose our vulnerability. From that perspective, the secret to happiness—to open yourself and accept life as it is and then to live out of the compassion and integrity of that wholeness—may sound foolish. Our typical approach to life is that success or wealth or power equals happiness. The problem with that is that the more you succeed, the more wealth and power you gain, the more you have to lose, and therefore the more you relate to life in fear and competition.  This way of life leads us to think we can only be happy in life by winning, by beating someone else at the game.

As those who seek to follow Jesus Christ we are called to embody a completely different vision of life.  We are called to spend our lives working to extend God’s mercy to the left out and beat down in this world, to seek to establish God’s peace and God’s justice for all the dispossessed and disenfranchised of this world.  We are called to align our lives with those whom the world despises and rejects—which means that we too will be despised and rejected because of our commitment to God’s mercy and peace and justice.  But like those whom the world tramples, when we align our lives in that way we also can rejoice when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.  As St. Paul says it, “God has chosen what is low and despised in the world.” (1 Cor. 1:28).

We may not like those words, but we cannot avoid the truth they confront us with.  The only way we can truly embody Jesus’ vision of God’s kingdom and God’s justice and God’s peace is by opening ourselves to accept life as it is and our own vulnerability to the pains and losses and disappointments of life. It is only as we embrace life in this way that we can find true joy, and can open ourselves enough to leave competition behind and instead relate to those around us in compassion and integrity. May God grant us the courage to embark on that path of life—to walk in the light that our savior Jesus the Christ has brought to us, and so find the true secret to blessedness, joy beyond measure.