

Sermon: February 2, 2020 – Matthew 5:1-12

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

We all like stories of people who rise from humble beginnings to do great things. Gordie Howe using rolled up Eaton's catalogues for shin pads and becoming one of the top three hockey players ever. Shania Twain, Celine Dion and Oprah Winfrey, rising from poverty and challenging family circumstances to international stardom. Peace by Chocolate, founded by the Hadhad family, Syrian refugees sponsored by a community group in Antigonish, NS. Jesus Christ, born of a teenage mom and raised in the high country of Galilee.

Within our own life narratives, we may have shining moments where we have overcome a barrier, or perhaps one obstacle after another. I won't bore you with the details but I've got a couple of those from childhood years, times when persistence and bit of competitiveness overcame other obstacles, and those memories still bring a little blush of pride to my cheeks. And I can't tell you how proud I am of CYAN's growth, from a good idea voiced by Marj Hughes at Ralph Connor's Annual Meeting in 2016, to an organization that had over 2,000 participants in nearly 80 events last year. Caylee and Tara and Zack, CYAN's young adult board members and co-chairs, and the Friends of CYAN from this congregation and the wider community have helped the seeds so humbly sown to grow into a project that helps young adults in this town connect and learn and play and have a voice... and feel hopeful for a future here.

With our love for stories where obstacles are overcome, we need to remind ourselves of why those stories stand out. They stand out, because there are so many stories that turn out exactly the *opposite* way, the *expected* way, with obstacles *not* overcome. Whether it is belittlement by an abusive adult in a child's life, blows landed by a neighbour or neighbourhood, chronic health issues that shroud each day in pain, or the rules of a system set up for someone else to succeed but not you, so many people in our community and nation and world face countless obstacles in their daily lives - and without extraordinary internal resources, community supports and/or the occasional big break, may find those obstacles insurmountable. Archetypal stories like David and Goliath have been told and retold for centuries because the little guy wins, but as a very "earthy" friend in rural Saskatchewan reminded me, David only had to defeat Goliath once; if David has to take on Goliath day after day after day, the story doesn't usually go so well.

Jesus was well aware of all of the obstacles that life presents, when he went up a hillside to begin his preaching, with his towering declaration of blessedness: the beatitudes. These are words that speak not only to the head, but also to the heart, so I'm going to turn it over to the acapella group, "Sweet Honey in the Rock;" to share their version of Jesus' words. May their harmonies take you deep into God's presence with those who face obstacles, including you. <play <https://youtu.be/NrmhRoS-XE4> >

What an unusual list that Jesus came up with, to describe those who are especially blessed: Blessed are... the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and those specifically reviled and persecuted and slandered on account of their belief in Jesus.

In a world where "I am blessed" are words heard in an award acceptance speech, or after winning the Super Bowl, these *much more subdued qualities* named by Jesus may make us wonder what he had in mind. Why, for example, would the poor in spirit be listed here, rather than those whose lives are full to overflowing? Why list as blessed, those who grieve a death, rather than those dancing at a birth? These difficult circumstances named by Jesus are not typically the times when you point to the heavens and say, "thank you, Lord!"

Some of my head-scratching at Jesus' list of the blessed ones may come from the word translated as "blessed." The Greek word *μακαριοι* (Makarios) is a broad word that includes blessedness, happiness and good fortune. Pastor Mark Davis suggests that "honoured" might be an even better translation, and I like how that fits, for if we start all of these sentences with "Honoured are" it helps me move away from thinking of a blessing, as something that makes me happy, to understanding blessedness as holding wisdom, respect, an embrace of the deep realities of life, rather than that which brings more superficial pleasure.

The other way, though, that I wonder what Jesus meant, is that I tend to think of those who are blessed, as those who *already enjoy the benefit of things*. In my mind, to be blessed is to have *already* arrived and to *already* have some form of reward in one's hands. Whether one is blessed with material success, or friends or family, or good health, or talent or skill, the blessing is shown by something already present. But in Jesus' list, the state of blessedness, or happiness, or good fortune, or honour, comes not from *having* something, but from *being engaged in a process in which God points you* to something greater, fuller, deeper, more real. Jesus calls us to a dynamic life, a journey of purpose, growth, forgiveness, rebalance; and in that rebalancing, a state of divine blessing is revealed.

Bible Commentator Mark Alan Powell has done what I find to be a very helpful structural analysis of these first verses of the Sermon on the Mount, revealing three equally-sized sections, 35 or 36 words each, each section with its own special focus.

The first four of the beatitudes, verses 3 to 6, focus on people who are clearly having a challenging time in life, a spiritual underclass of sorts: the poor in spirit or (in Luke's version) those who are just plain poor; those who mourn; those who are humble or have been humbled; those hungering and thirsting for righteousness, or those whose hunger and thirst is more physical. Amidst these hardships, these people have come to know things about the nature of God that others may not know. These qualities of poverty, mourning, meekness, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, are not an "admission requirement" to God's gracious love but they sure do make a person more receptive to it.

The next four beatitudes, verses 7 to 10, show blessings derived not so much by obstacles overcome, but by alignment with the fullness of God's love. Choosing mercy rather than retribution brings us closer to the heart of God. Purity of heart, a deep contentedness rather than being motivated by envy or jealousy or greed, invites God's holy presence. Peacemaking, even when you pay a price to do so, is a brave and exceptional expression of Divine love.

We can imagine that some of the people listening to Jesus in Galilee, would have sensed the distance in the phrasing of these first two sections, as if Jesus was shining a light on someone else, calling the group to notice someone they may not have noticed before: the meek/humble, those who grieve, those being persecuted. Hearing Jesus declare God's blessing and honour on those people over there, suggests that you, too, need to approach them with honour, and respect, maybe even solidarity and advocacy. If, however, *you yourself* are poor in spirit, if *you yourself* are being targeted for trying to make peace, you would hear these from Jesus words as even more amazing: these would be some of the best words you'd ever heard because in these words, Jesus declares that *you* are not alone or invisible or unsupported.

After these two sections which might be talking about your life, or might be talking about someone else, that poor person over there, the last two verses turn and become more direct: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." There is no way to interpret these final words as being about someone else – these are aimed directly at the listener.

Jesus warms up his audience on the hillside – and us, as his present-day listeners – by assuring them/us that there is more to life than meets the eye. A life filled with obstacles, has the potential of divine connection as those challenges are engaged. A life in which your priorities and God's are as one, is more fulfilling than a life lived from selfish ambitions. Then, once he has warmed us up with these observations about life and these promises of Divine presence, Jesus confronts us with a hard reality: if we choose to walk with him, if we set aside our ego needs in favour of God's self-giving love; if we spend less time seeking surface goals and go deep in seeking a world of justice, and support, and love, we will likely endure some hardships of our own.

If Jesus had really wanted to sell the product, he would have put some pizzazz into the beatitudes: you know, like, blessed are the strong, blessed are those who know they're right, blessed are the winners. But Jesus doesn't do "spin." No, Jesus identifies with those for whom life is made difficult by others, Jesus calls us to old-style virtues like peacemaking, and Jesus guarantees that people aren't gonna like it when we stand with *those for whom the rules are designed not to work*. That may not be the path that we would have set for ourselves, but it is the path of blessing, and honour, and life.

In all of this, Jesus invites us to open our hearts to a new way of being, and to open our communities to a new sense of "us." God already loves, blesses, honours those dealing with the greatest challenges. How could that not be the way our heart works, as a person, as a community of faith? Christ has already enumerated the qualities that are present when one's life is opened to God's love – qualities like peacemaking, humility, emotional vulnerability, integrity. How could these not be the way our heart works, as a person, as a community of faith? And Jesus tells us something we probably don't want to hear: if we are truly faithful, it's going to hurt, it's going to cost, because these are not inconsequential changes. We are promised a way of life nothing short of abundant, but it's not going to be without its challenges.

So we celebrate, with Christ, all people in the world who overcome all manner of difficulties, *including the times when those overcoming challenges are us, or me*. We celebrate, with Christ, all people who have discovered the power of his new realm of inclusion and love and re-balance of the scales of justice, including the times when those adopting his way are us, or me. We accept, with Christ, that widening our love as wide as God's love, is not without consequence – but is the most important, rewarding thing we could ever do.

We seek, as those gathered on a Galilean hillside, a realm in which none are "outsiders" for our understanding of "us" is all-encompassing. And in this journey, there is great blessing. May this be so. Amen.

References cited:

Davis, D. Mark. "Honoring the Dishonored." <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/>

Peace by Chocolate. <https://peacebychocolate.ca/>

Powell, Mark Allan. *God With Us; A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995. Cited at <http://gluthermanson.blogspot.com/2017/01/two-kinds-of-blessedness.html>

Sweet Honey in the Rock. "Beatitudes" <https://youtu.be/NrmhRoS-XE4>

© 2020 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.