

**Sermon: January 29, 2023 – Micah 6: 1-8 and Matthew 5: 1-12**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church: Rev Greg Wooley**

Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the pure in heart. Thus begin Jesus' wonderful words, remembered as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (chapter 5), the Sermon on the Plain in Luke (chapter 6), words which set his agenda of inclusive but not easily achieved love. They are words of beauty, of comfort, of political challenge, of longing, of hope and of tears.

Rather than approaching these words in a linear fashion, I now invite you on a little tour. There is a place, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, traditionally known as the Mount of Beatitudes. Here there is a convent, a guest house, and a chapel. One is welcomed by huge shrubs which declare by fragrance, that they are ROSEMARY. Birds flock to this place and start making themselves known by 5:00 AM, inviting one to catch sunrise over Galilee.

The tiny little chapel itself is octagonal, with each of the eight walls dedicated to one of the eight beatitudes in the gospel of Matthew. Pilgrims regularly enter the space, and even with the coming and going silence is both expected and observed. Note this place, for we'll return here.

Mark Davis, a Presbyterian Minister in California whose translations of the Greek New Testament have been a huge help to me this past decade, has done his usual fine job exploring the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. He delves into the must-be-engaged theological questions, such as, should the first word of each line– the Hebrew word *ashrêi* (אַשְׁרֵי), the Greek word *Makarios* [Μακάριοι], the Latin word *Beatitudo* (hence, “beatitudes”), be translated as Blessed, or Honoured, or Fortunate, or Happy? He actually leans more toward “honoured”, but I'll say more about that in a few moments. He also reaches into the difficult emotional space of this scripture: while the words are lovely, even calming, the realities they describe are challenging – feeling impoverished, being taken for granted, being the target of persecution. And while it is likely that the Sermon on the Mount is constructed of bits and pieces of many sayings of Jesus, engaging it as one cohesive message can be of great spiritual value.

At the end of his essay on this scripture, Mark Davis writes this: “When Jesus says ‘Blessed are [this group of people or that group of people]’ in the beatitudes, I suggest that he is *not* saying, ‘Do this and you'll be blessed’ or ‘In God's eyes this is blessed’ or ‘One of these days these folks will be blessed.’ I believe *Jesus is actually blessing the meek when he says, ‘Blessed are the meek,’* and that the meek, upon hearing the words, are actually blessed.”

This, to me, is an extremely important viewpoint that invites us not only to process with our minds the full implication of these words of Jesus, but to search our hearts, wondering what it would be like to experience these words first-hand... to be in a gathering of the curious on a Galilean hillside, hearing these new words from a local lad from Nazareth, up in the high country about 50 km away.

While the phrasing of the beatitudes is mostly third-person, talking about “people with these characteristics” but not necessarily “you” or “me”, I don't think it's out of line to bridge that gap and suggest that Jesus knew full well that his crowd would have included many people in all of these named categories – peacemakers and mourners and those reviled by others, all side by side. Many of the first generation believers drawn to the person and message of Jesus were those who longed for social change coupled with positive affirmation of their

personhood, and these words would have been like a drink of cool clear water when one is parched with thirst.

For the next few minutes, then, rather than keeping safe distance from these words and the one who spoke them, I invite you to enter into a more intimate space with Jesus. Imagine that you are one of the people being directly addressed by him, that you – YOU – are receiving his blessing. Some of these blessings may touch your heart, some may be hard to hear because they are contrary to negative but authoritative voices that have diminished you, and I hope that this can be a safe place for you to experience whatever it is that you experience. You may also find that some of these blessings remind you of someone in your life's journey and if so, I suggest that you say a little prayer for them or reach out to them in some way.

So wherever it makes sense for you to meet with Jesus to hear these things – here in this place, or in a special place where you may have met up with Jesus before, or perhaps in that little eight-sided chapel at the Mount of Beatitudes, envision yourself in that place, and hear these words of Christ Jesus spoken to you:

“Blessed are you, when you are overwhelmed by poverty: financial poverty, poverty of spirit, poverty of resilience, poverty of relationship, poverty of faith. Truly, the kingdom of heaven is yours...

“Blessed are you as you mourn: when you mourn loved ones no longer on this earthly journey, when you lament opportunities that have gone away, when you grieve past ways of being that are no longer. Whatever or whoever you mourn, know that you are loved, held, and comforted...

“Blessed are you, those regarded as meek: stepping back for others to shine, taking your turn and your share, respectfully allowing discourse to unfold, tending the needs of mother earth rather than over-consuming, assessing the needs of the common good and not just your own wants. If you have been called meek or weak or soft, or if you judge yourself in these ways, know that the earth is your inheritance.

“Blessed is your hunger and thirst for righteousness, for these desires will be satisfied. Whenever you set your sights on God's holy gifts of kindness, fairness, justice, equity, whenever you notice and give thanks for beauty, your noble intention has set your footing where it needs to be.

“Blessed are you as you are merciful, for you will be shown mercy. Retributive justice, getting even, holding a grudge, are simply ways of drinking the same poison over and over again, but mercy touches holiness and it invites mercy to be extended to you and to everyone involved.

“Blessed are you, pure in heart. In a world that encourages loud and angry and thoughtless and selfish, your pure heart equips you for life and amidst the hubbub you will see God.

“Blessed are you, peacemaker. Whether you are working for world peace or helping shine the light of truth on a difficult family situation, whether you are creating space for opponents to resolve their differences or seeking reconciliation for long-held hurts, God's sacred power is with you and you will be called the children of God.

“And blessed are you when you are persecuted for righteousness, when you are insulted and slandered, lied about or the subject of gossip. Such soul-destroying ventures say nothing about you and those who generate them are to be pitied. When you are being derided or dismissed you are connected with a great cloud of witnesses who have walked this path

before you and know this: the kingdom of heaven belongs to you.

We sit in silence with all these things – and on screen, I will have the key words of these eight beatitudes, in case you felt rushed away from one of these earlier on.

*Blessed are you: the poor/poor in spirit. you who mourn. the meek. those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. the merciful. the pure in heart. the peacemakers. the reviled, those who are slandered, those persecuted for righteousness.*

Some of you have had your eyes closed for this, and some of you may have imagined yourself in a place far removed from here, and if that is the case for you, I invite you to re-enter this space gently, when you are ready.

However you entered into this, there are a couple of truths I feel compelled to lift up:

the first, as stated so well by Malcolm Guite, is that Christ is not only the holy one who lived long ago and far away. God still comes to us in the risen Christ - now, as we are, where we are, in the midst of the world condition as it is - with words of beloved affirmation, support, advocacy and empowerment. Christ sees the goodness within us, the Christ-light that burns within, and desires nothing but the best for our hearts, our lives, and all who are touched by our lives.

The second truth, is that the heart of God always has been and always will be attuned to those who are hurt by people and institutions and empires who use power in heartless ways. Thinking back to the classic question as posed seven centuries before Jesus, “With what shall I come before the LORD and bow myself before God on high?” the answer, through the prophet Micah (6:1-8), was this: “God has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” However we experience God, God will always draw us to humility, kindness, and the pursuit of equity and justice. The Holy One has placed these things in your heart.

And so we give thanks to God, known to as Creator of all, as the Redeemer who lifts the highest truths of our lives, as the Spirit, the Sustainer who fills us with hope. We give thanks to God as we receive these blessings – for my life, for our lives, for the lives of those we love, for the lives of those who need to know their belovedness and worth, for the lives of persons and peoples and nations presently under the thumb of aggression and hatred. Blessed be all who need to be blessed, in the name of the eternal God. Amen.

#### References cited :

Davis, D. Mark <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/01/honoring-dishonored.html>

Guite, Malcolm – quoted in <https://ralphconnor.ca/sermon-may-12-2019-psalm-23-and-john-21/>