

“Words of Jesus ... Beatitudes V”

Prayer: *Startle us again, O God, with your amazing grace. We come here knowing that our lives are filled with questions and uncertainties. We come to be still, to be together, and to hear about a different word. So, speak the word you have for us and give us faith to know again your love and grace for us and for all your children, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

A young preacher was asked to hold a graveside burial service at a small local cemetery for someone with no family or friends. The preacher started early, but got lost, making several wrong turns. Eventually, a half-hour late, he saw a backhoe and its crew, but the hearse was nowhere in sight, and the workmen were eating lunch.

The diligent young pastor went to the open grave and found the vault lid already in place. Feeling guilty because of his tardiness, he preached an impassioned and lengthy service, sending the deceased to the great beyond in style. But as he was returning to his car, he overheard one of the workmen say, “I ain’t never seen nothin’ like that and I’ve been putting in septic tanks for 20 years.”

When I started this series of sermons on the *Words of Jesus* I thought more than once, you are one arrogant preacher to try this. Here you are picking out the beatitudes and saying, “This is the preamble, the essence ... the “Cliff Notes” version of the Gospel. Now, that I am nearing the end, I feel like the young pastor learning he has just prayed over the septic tanks. Wow, there is so much more to be learned from these few verses.

Back on January 8, I mention that there are two versions of these sayings ... with the major version found in Matthew’s Gospel. Luke’s version of the Beatitudes is found in chapter 6 ... in the midst of what is referred to as “The Sermon on the Plain.” Luke shares four blessings that are similar to what we have read these past few weeks. “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*” (Luke 6:20-21) And if we go to our phrases for today we read: “*Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.*” (6:22)

Matthew’s abstract concepts of mourning and comfort become Luke’s concrete actions of weeping and laughter. The recipients of the message were the audience, whereas in Matthew the recipients included the audience and others beyond that immediate hearing. Luke’s blessings followed by the sayings of woe ... are grittier, dirtier, and much less soft spoken and less comfortable. The third Gospel shares lots of detail like the size of the crowd, where they were from, their physical condition, and the pushing and straining to touch Jesus? Luke has painted a picture where desperate people have come to hear good news ... suffering people, people who have exhausted all their resources.

But lets go back to Matthew and verses 5:10-12. “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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.”

This blessing is granted to those who come seeking God’s presence in Jesus of Nazareth ... and they were persecuted, victimized, hated, and ill-treated. But Jesus went further ... “... *when people revile you, persecute you, utter all kinds of evil against you, falsely on my account.*” Did you catch the big change in the language? Jesus addressed the audience with the second person “you.” There was personal danger just in listening to this new prophet who was addressing things of the world so harshly. As the author James Powell has written at this point: “Certainly, when Jesus said what he said, the disciples probably scratched their heads and wondered what it could mean; the crowd was probably more confused, still scrambling to catch up with the earlier Beatitudes.” (see Powell, *The Beatitudes for Today*, page 85)

Jesus already knew what was coming or as some scholars have suggested, this is part of Matthew’s re-write in hindsight. John the Baptist had already been beheaded, Jesus eventually was crucified, Stephen was stoned by the mob and there were countless followers of Jesus who would be persecuted. For all of the emphasis in our Christian tradition on the grace of God there has actually been torture, persecution, and even sacrificial death for the faithful followers of Jesus.

Many of you are familiar with the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s momentous book *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was first published in 1937 in Germany as the Nazi Regime was rising in power and was based on the Sermon on the Mount.

One of the most quoted parts of the book begins: “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.” Then Bonhoeffer quickly follows: “Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light.’” (see *Cost of Discipleship*, page 45-47)

It becomes our task as followers to reflect on the truths of our world and we may be persecuted for our beliefs. Ultimately the Beatitudes present the evocative conclusion that our identity is not defined by what happens in our lives. No, we are “fleeting tourists” passing through to a distant destination and a future where we can passionately trust.

We have all heard and read about Mother Teresa’s order of the Sisters of Charity and their work in the streets of India. On the wall in one of the children’s homes in Calcutta are the following words modeled on the Beatitudes.

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered; Forgive them anyway.
 If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; Be kind anyway.
 If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies; Succeed anyway.
 If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you; Be honest and frank anyway.
 What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; Build anyway.
 If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous; Be happy anyway.
 The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God; It was never between you and them anyway.

Or again as James Howell writes: "Having reached the end of the Beatitudes, we may ask for evidence that any of this really happens in human life—and plenty of evidence is at hand." (see Howell, p. 93)

Today, maybe the best thing for us to do is to allow these *Words of Jesus* to nurture our lives by putting things in perspective. We understand God ... we have received, we are receiving and we will continue to receive ... blessings in life. We know that God wants to bless our lives, just as we are, with less that perfect bodies, long memories of disappointments, forgetful memories of basic facts, and so many trials in the future. Jesus knew this truth about our creator God and he wants us to know the blessings of God. Yet, it is so easy for us to focus every moment and every ounce of energy and every whisper of faith that we have on the current pains, fears, and crisis. The Beatitudes and the *Words of Jesus* support and care of us in all of life can ingrain into our thoughts to become a part of our daily behavioral choices ... the wonder of trusting in God.

The Words of Jesus and the Beatitudes are affirming despite all that happens in our lives ... revealing the fundamental nature of God and the essence of all that our faith tells us that God blesses our lives. The people who are poor in spirit, who feel grief for what they have lost, who are meek and lowly, who hunger for what is right in our world, who show mercy and generosity toward others, who are pure in their hearts, who live as peacemakers and contribute to humanity, all of those who are innocent and good, who tend to suffer at the hands of the evil and powerful. Yes, all of these are blessed and a part of God's Kingdom.

There is a member of this congregation who has been ill for some time and is on hospice knowing she is not going to get any better. When you visit with her she says things like "This is only one passing event in my life. I will not let it become my life or control the days I have left." This person has no problem talking about her life and the blessings she has received. She is positive and radiant about life even after losing over 30 pounds. She is able to see the blessings in her life and even as she becomes weaker by the day, she knows she is loved and never alone. Others are learning from her about the days they will be facing. Wow, I visit for awhile and then realize I am the one who is benefitting from the experience she is so strong in her faith.

People are blessed who are able to focus on the presence of God in their lives, even as they near the end of their given days. It is not just a Pollyanna vision of the days to come or some pleasant housing in the here after. It is acknowledgement that the hands of God continue to support even through those days of dying and even beyond death.

I know another person who regularly visits others in a care center, gives small gifts as she remembers birthdays, and makes sure no one sits alone during the dinner hour. She is always doing something nice for others and everyone loves her for her selflessness and her constant generosity. I said to her one day, "You are so good to everybody." Her response was "No, it is God who has been so good to me. God has given me so much more than I can ever use." Then she went on ... "The more I give away, the more I have. It is wonderful." God uses her and in turn she is constantly receiving ... and then giving again.

If you and I are going to make a difference in our world ... if this church is going to impact on the life of this community ... then we need to act on these **Words of Jesus** and the Beatitudes. These **Words of Jesus** are an invitation to reflect and mirror the life and ministry of Jesus. One of the privileges we have is the exposure to some wonderful and long-lived lives of people who have lived the Beatitudes. They are a painting a metaphoric expression of the work of God within us.

John Killinger concludes a sermon by saying, “Don’t look around you and think how hard life is. Look around and see how filled with mystery and goodness it is. See how wonderful the world looks when you know God is at work redeeming it so that humility and purity and compassion and longing for justice and peace will all be fulfilled and rewarded in the eternal scheme of things.” (see John Killinger, *Letting God Bless You*, page 139).

These blessings are like the Saturday morning breakfasts we used to have when the boys were younger. There would be our three boys ... sometimes their friends would be there too ... and then about twice a year we would invite the whole neighborhood. The menu would be pancakes cooked on the large electric griddle with Dad as the chef. There would be lots of noise and there would be pancakes and syrup all over the hands, clothes, hair, chairs and of course, the floor. These blessings are like that syrup ... messy, imperfect, and oh soooooo good.

The Words of Jesus through the Beatitudes ... are God’s magnificent way of touching our lives ... and all of the created world with the wonder and joy of God’s presence. “The gospel of Jesus Christ comes down to a rather simple proposition for ordinary people like you and like me. If God is to be known, that knowledge will be in the lives of the ordinary people who are redeemed by his extraordinary message of love. (Peter Gomes, *Sermons, Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, page 119)

The **Words of Jesus**, for your lives and for my life.

Scriptures: Psalm 24:1-6; Matthew 5:1-12