

... A Sermon Series

# Blessed



mourn comforted earth  
reward merciful spirit utter  
thirst peacemakers heart  
way pure prophets  
children revile  
persecute  
hunger people  
filled God glad  
receive persecuted  
Rejoice kingdom  
evil meek heaven  
inherit falsely mercy  
righteousness  
great called poor account  
see kinds  
sake

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## “Words of Jesus”

We have all read the *words of Jesus*, and especially that section in the Sermon on the Mount that we call “The Beatitudes” as found in Matthew’s Gospel, verses 1-12. For five weeks our sermons at Faith Presbyterian Church focused on the teachings of Jesus found in the Beatitudes ... we call them *The Beatitudes*.

Jesus taught many times and in many places and addressed many different people. His themes had a unique consistency in words and expectations from God. *The Beatitudes* has often been referred to as the summary of the “*Words of Jesus*”.

I hope and pray that you will enjoy and find personal meaning for your faith journey in these sermons.



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## “Words of Jesus ... Beatitudes I”

Prayer: *Spirit of the living God, you are the caretaker of our souls. We have been waiting and searching, experiencing a desert in our souls. Clear away the dead growth of the past; break up the hard clods of custom and routine; cultivate and water and tend our hearts. Fill us with the seeds of your word until new life buds and flowers within us. Amen.*

Back fifty years ago a Psychiatrist, James Tucker Fisher, closed his book *Few Buttons Missing* with this “revealing” discovery. He wrote: “I dreamed of writing a handbook that would be simple, practical, easy to understand and easy to follow. It would tell people how to live - what thoughts and attitudes and philosophies to cultivate and what pitfalls to avoid, in seeking mental health. I attended every symposium possible and took notes on the wise words of teachers and my colleagues who were leaders in the field. ... And then quite by accident, I discovered that such a work had already been completed. ... If you were to take the sum total of all the authoritative articles ever written by the most qualified of psychologists and psychiatrists on the subject of mental hygiene - if you were to combine them and refine them and cleave out the excess verbiage ... you would have an awkward and incomplete summation of the Sermon on the Mount. And it would suffer immeasurably through a comparison.” (See *A Few Buttons Missing: The Case Book of a Psychiatrist*, Page 273)

Today, we begin a five-part sermon series on the Beatitudes which are the opening and prelude to the Sermon on the Mount.

Let’s begin with understanding the setting for these historic words. The gospel writer Matthew presents this sermon sequence at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. There is significance to the physical setting of the sermon.

Jesus is sitting and the disciples are approaching him, as a king sits listening to the needs of his subjects. With Jesus on “a mount,” Matthew has indicated that this is an important scene and “These are the

**Words of Jesus** ... the Messiah from God”. Jesus of Nazareth is not just another prophet and he is like a king on a throne with his subjects hearing his inaugural address.

So, what are the Beatitudes? Some would suggest these few verses are awe inspiring grace while others suggest they are meant to be unspoken commands. There is also genuine confusion over the Greek work that gets translated as beatitude or what we read today as “blessed”. The most common translation has each saying beginning with the word “Blessed”, although we all know some versions begin with the word “Happy”.

Another factor that we will explore in future weeks is that the Gospel of Luke (chapter 6) has another version and what is called the “Sermon on the Plain”. Jesus taught many different times and in many different settings. His proclamation themes were repetitive and consistent depending on the audience at hand.

James Howell has written: “How intriguing is it to consider that Jesus uttered Beatitudes in many villages, in several synagogues, and probably one on one with some Gentile on the road, with Peter, with John, with his mother?” (See *The Beatitudes Today*, page 14)

We need to ask, what was Jesus trying to say? These eight beatitudes are not some packaged deal to make the demands of the Good News easy. These phrases are poetic and yet pithy and concise. Every word is not explained, leaving room for the listener to struggle and find that inner logic and meaning. So, we in our own way need to thrash out the significance and purpose of these **Words of Jesus** for our lives.

Frederick Buechner has written the following that I find to be a helpful introduction to these teachings of Jesus. “Whom did Jesus single out for special commendation? Not the spiritual giants but ‘the poor in spirit’ as he called them, the ones who spiritually speaking have absolutely nothing to give and absolutely everything to receive ... like the Prodigal telling his father ‘I am not worthy to be called thy son’ only to discover for the first time all he had in having a father.” (See *Whistling in the Dark, An ABC Theologized*, page 18)

This morning we look at the first Beatitude: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* (Mat. 5:3) Who are “the poor in spirit” here in our world?

I find my thoughts drifting quickly to the three stories I heard from members this week about children who are going through serious health concerns. Loved ones offer prayers on their behalf ... and in so many ways reach out and try to provide supportive strength. I think also about a number of our members who have shared the deeply pained stories of losing a child to death ... or to the interminable separation of war. Today, at this very hour 365 days ago the tragedy in Tucson had just happened and we are remembering six people who died and the others who were wounded.

There are feelings of guilt, feelings of deep doubt, feelings of being alone ... all expressions of being “poor in spirit”. And to these the ***Word of Jesus*** comes to bring peace and comfort. There is an acknowledgement that the person passing through the pains of life is never alone, never outside the comforting presence of God.

This is Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, saying there is a new image of God .... a God who comes to the poor in spirit and the meek. That is a near-revolutionary image for God and so very different from that of the generations before Jesus. God had been a God of the wealthy and successful and humans who were rewarded for their faithful devotion to the law.

These ***Words of Jesus***, are saying the poor in spirit, who are not ashamed to admit that without God they can do nothing, are already living in the presence of God. They already tried pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, they failed at being masters of their fate. With all their resources dried up and nothing left to keep themselves going, they have nowhere else to go but God. These ***Words of Jesus*** are telling that God is already waiting to bless and empower them as never before. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

The Beatitudes are not rules to be kept, but attitudes to be nurtured and lived out as God gives us the grace to go and do likewise. Take time this week to re-read on these blessings coming down from God that give us grace to be faithful and Christ-like. The beatitudes are not goals to be met or laws to be kept. No, instead the beatitudes

empower the poor in spirit, the hungry and thirsty, and the meek, to come near and turn the darkness into the light and sorrow into joy.

The Beatitudes ... these **Words of Jesus** ... are the Gospel, the Good News of God's grace changing everything, turning the world upside down so it will finally be right side up. May God bless us with this grace so we can see God's Kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Pastors have learned that on Sunday mornings we will meet people who are doing great and have had an awesome week enjoying retirement. We also know there are some whose life has been falling apart. Desperate to find support, peace, and a listening ear, these persons find their way to church. Sometimes the tears begin to flow and I hear a story about all that has happened ... a daughter with cancer, a best friend who had just died, an 18 year old pet who has been that lap friend every night, or finally a new diagnosis from the doctor.

In those moments there is a person who is poor in spirit.

Dear friends in the Faith Church family, these **Words of Jesus** are suggesting that pain and suffering are entry points to blessings. That seems to be the message in the **Words of Jesus**: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*"

These are the **Words** for our lives ... today and every day.

Psalm 15; Matthew 5:1-12

## “Words of Jesus ... Beatitudes II”

*Prayer: God of promise and steadfast love, we give you thanks for the teaching of Jesus. For the blessings we enjoy and the sufferings we presently endure, we give you thanks. For the promises by which we live and for the hope of glory we receive in faith, we give you thanks. Give us merciful hearts toward others as you are merciful with us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Today for our sermon time we are at part two in our reflections on the Beatitudes and the two short verses where we hear blessings for “those who mourn and those who are meek”. Judith Viorst has written (see *Necessary Losses*, page 2) ... “When we think of loss we think of the loss, through death, of people we love. But loss is a far more encompassing theme in our life. For we lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on. And our losses include not only our separations and departures from those we love, but our conscious and unconscious losses of romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of freedom and power, illusions of safety—and the loss of our own younger self, the self that thought it always would be unwrinkled and invulnerable and immortal.”

Our whole lives have been filled with losses for which we mourn.

I want to begin today by saying that we all mourn and the pains are deep and always present in our thoughts and our hearts. Let me begin with a more personal story. There was a time in my ministry when I sincerely felt called to move on to a new and larger congregation with a more demanding mission. It meant leaving a beautiful home and Ellen resigning from a position where she was dearly loved. Our children had grown up in that community and call that home. I was leaving a position where the church had experienced significant growth with many issues of transition from a very long-term founding pastor behind us.

Just as we were preparing the final stages of the move, both of my parents died 18 days apart. And besides ... the congregation I was

leaving was furious with my decision and they had no qualms about telling me!

I thought I was going to be permanently depressed and would forever question my decision-making process and most of all, the integrity of God's call to this new ministry. For weeks I walked around as if there was this immense burden on my shoulders. I was running on automatic pilot and my source of emotional and professional support ... my parents ... was no longer accessible. Just thinking about those few months opens up huge wounds and a genuine sense of what it means to mourn.

At the same time, while serving this congregation I have heard the stories about experiences in World War II. I have heard women talk about what it meant to have your husband and father of your children gone for several years. I have heard about experiences during the Depression and how difficult it was to go hungry, never knowing if and when the family would have to move. I have heard mothers share the story of the death of one or more of their children. And then I have heard a member say, "I cannot go to bed tonight. I have slept with Susie (and that was not her name) at my side for 68 years."

So many in this church family have known the depths of human mourning and it is what the Bible calls "lament". That is what mourning is all about. Mourning is about death, ... change and loss ... decline and weakness, ... and the facing of the inevitable.

Eugene Peterson has translated it ... *"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you."* Or as our NRSV translation says, *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."*

God is our source of comfort, the "dear one" who is always present. And yet we ask, "Why would Jesus have the audacity to say this?" Where is the blessing in this open wound ... and what is so comforting about the experience of mourning? Is the blessing upon those who mourn simply tied to the future hope that they too will be comforted? Or is there, somehow, a blessing in the midst of it ... Is there blessing in the grief and the sadness that washes over us?

Jesus knew about grieving and loss, even as the crowds surrounded him and he saw the broken and the wounded. He saw the mothers with dying children and the children who had been left parentless. We have been there and we know what it means to mourn. In this moment when these *Words of Jesus* left his lips, I wonder, did it emerge from his own burdened mourning? Did he feel that exhaustion and that bit of pain creeping into his joints and that is why he left the crowds and sat down?

It is as if in these words, he sees the needs—the hunger, the thirst, the longing—and, somehow, he sees blessing in all of it. Perhaps we cannot even understand these words until we acknowledge our own mourning ... or become meek. Maybe, maybe we cannot understand the words and feel the deep and genuine sense of being blessed.

Perhaps it only makes sense to us when we hit rock-bottom and are running on automatic pilot. When we are so ashamed of what we did the night before that our lips tremble. When we finally realize that we have no control over our addiction. When we are in such mourning, that we stare at the ground as we walk and we cannot look up.

Could it be that there is a gift that comes, even in this loss? Could it be that there is something good in the anguish and the valley of the shadow of death? In the absence of a loved one, love is still present. When we are facing a chasm of great magnitude, there is the possibility of reconciliation, forgiveness and peace. And to these the Word of Jesus come to bring peace and comfort. Or to use Peterson's words: "*Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.*"

There is an acknowledgement that through the pains of life we are never alone, we are never outside the comforting presence of God. Then our text takes us to verse 5: "*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*" What does it mean for a human being to be meek? In many ways it is easier to define "meekness" by what it is not. It is not self-centered, boastful, assertive, undisciplined, wild, disrespectful of others, ... you know the rest. Meekness is something like what it means to be God-like ... and that person is like God's presence in the world. Meekness is associated with a person who is mild, gentle, unassuming, and even on some levels, a passive person. Meekness is usually something forced upon someone ... the meek are those treated by others

as if they were nobodies. But Jesus is talking about a “holy meekness” that is grounded in a relationship with God and the goodness of God.

Thomas Merton has written: “The humble man receives praise the way a clean window takes the light of the sun. The truer and more intense the light is, the less you see of the glass.” (see *New Seeds of Contemplation*, page 189)

The meek person is kind, caring, sympathetic, generous, and compassionate. We live in a world where the successful are usually those that become anything they want with non-stop aggressiveness. Modern media encourages us to be pushy and aggressive in obtaining our rights, as well as in getting as much as we can whether or not we have a right to it. We are told that the purpose of life is to magnify yourself and make ourselves as big and important as possible. That is how we have come to believe that our world works.

The Jews in Jesus’ day had similar ideas for their kingdom that was going to be violent and militaristic. They were waiting for a Messiah to come and wipe-out their enemies and restore their power. Then, this man who people claim is the Messiah launches into his victory speech. Those that are listening to him are blood-thirsty and longing for freedom from their oppression by the Romans. Thousands follow him at this point in his ministry and it is not just because he can do magic tricks, but they assume there is hope in a new kingdom forcing out the old.

What a downer this must have been to those in the crowd. This inaugural address was completely backwards and anti-climatic, especially this line about the meek. This does not pass any test of authenticity for those listening. What is meek and why is this so appalling? Matthew shows us by quoting Jesus saying things like “*You are the light of the world.*” and “*a city built on a hill cannot be hid.*” Jesus obviously wants his followers to be out there, not hidden, being light, not dark. So meekness is not being hidden or passive, or staying in a closet.

I regularly conclude worship with the same benediction: “*Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good; render to no person evil for evil; strengthen the faint-hearted; support the weak; heal the afflicted; honor and serve all people; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.*” Recently

someone asked me about that word of hope. These words come from the *First Letter to the Thessalonians*, chapter five. These words describe the kind of meekness that Jesus was talking about. It is a proclamation of the Christian life as presented in these two verses.

Just a few minutes ago we listened to a deeply moving duet call *Pie Jesu* arranged by Andrew Lloyd Webber. These Latin words mean “dutiful”, “godly” or “kind” and come from a requiem mass, usually sung in a funeral mass or recognition of the death of Jesus. It is the proclamation of the final hope and comfort that supports all who mourn ... and live the life of meekness. These ***Words of Jesus*** come to us today to bring hope, comfort and peace.

They are there with the widow who sits in the Lazyboy where her husband used to relax, just so she can remember the sweetness of his presence. The blessings are there, when we are sorting through clothes, and we suddenly are enveloped with a waft of perfume that reminds us of Christmas with our mom. When the walls of our home seem to be haunted with our lover and we do not ever want to leave. The blessings are there in the facts that the ways in which we hurt each other seem to fade, and the resentment is replaced with understanding. The blessings are there, as we defrost the homemade casseroles that the church member delivered.

These ***Words of Jesus*** have traveled a long a way over the centuries and they have never been so comforting ... we know that we are blessed. These are the ***Words of Jesus*** for your lives and for mine.

Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

## “Words of Jesus ... Beatitudes III”

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you have made visible your hunger and thirst for merciful justice when you prayed for those who crucified you. May we share your desire to see justice and what is right in our lives and our world. Make us vigilant so we may discover the opportunities for sharing your justice and mercy in our lives this week. Amen.*

As we come to the sermon, you all know this is week III in the series on the Beatitudes and the Words of Jesus. Many of you lived through the Depression, ... with a capital “D”. The painful memories include times of doing without and the distortions in the economy in our communities.

Yet today we are interested in the newest Buick, and where the stock market closed, ... and when will the housing values return? I have heard many speak of frustration with interest rates, returns on investments, and possible cuts that might come in Medicare. We have all lived through a period of significant economic downfalls and no one would choose to live through those times again. Yes, we have all benefitted from the booming capitalist economy.

And then we come to this fourth Beatitude ... *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled”*. The first three of the Beatitudes were a sincere blessing ... this saying from Jesus is a genuine challenge to our basic assumptions in life.

Let’s explore this “heavy” demand versus what we might see as the “heart of God” intersecting in our lives. The word that we struggle with is always “righteousness” ... or what is “right and good.” As James Howell has written: “The time gap between our day and that of Jesus is nowhere more unfathomably wide. Those who were in earshot of Jesus had no choices whatsoever. Hunger and thirst were not spiritual metaphors, but the reality of the daily grind.” (see *“The Beatitudes for Today”*, p. 57)

The audience that Jesus was addressing was not unlike so many of you who lived through the years in the Depression. Their high hopes of the coming Messiah included crops that flourished, economics that would support families, and so much more. They were familiar with the words from Isaiah 25 ... *“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.”* (Isaiah 25: 6) They were “hungry” for that day ... “thirsted” for the time ... when God would provide as promised.

But what happens when we bring these thoughts into our world today ... and ask, “How many of us have even thought about hungering for righteousness ... or what is good in the heart of God?” Righteousness and those things that are right, are they important in our lives? Do we not run away from that kind of talk and say, “I have my opinions and she has her opinions?” Or in this political season do we not dismiss what is said by saying ... “Oh, he is the soft hearted Democrat” ... or “She is that self-centered old-fashioned Republican.” We would much prefer to be singing “What the world needs now is love, sweet love.”

What was Jesus really talking about? A few verses further, Jesus warned that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. (Mat. 5:20) These authorities of the Law were not loved by anyone, but they were respected as authorities on what was right and good. Jesus was saying that God expects more ... more than even these authorities. Jesus is seeking righteousness in our personal behavior, but also in the social fabric of life. This is a message for personal righteousness, ... but also the social justice and righteousness in the world where we live.

Many of you are aware that there has been significant conflict in recent years within most of our major denominations. In this Presbytery a congregation has voted to leave the PCUSA on the grounds that their understanding of church is there is no place for social justice, there is never an appropriate kind of merciful demand from the church toward the voices of government ... and church is not open to those who come except as they have defined what is acceptable.

This beatitude lays a substantial expectation on this congregation to live as people who know ... *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”* ... Or as the New English Version has phrased it ... *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.”* Our call as faithful Christians is to pursue what is right and what we know to be the heart of God.

Now, knowing most of us are retired ... where we day-dream about things coming to an end ... there is a unique task. There is a profound reason for us to get up every morning appreciative that life is a cause and has a purpose, ... it is all about living that righteousness in our world. There is so much more we can be doing beyond ourselves ... praying for those without a home, ... helping to build that next Habitat house, ... opening our retirement account to provide food for someone who has lost their job.

It is in *our hungering and thirsting for righteousness* in our lives that we find the grace and love of God. There is beauty in the yearning for a better life ... and all those strange faces we see on the news.

The Beatitudes set the world's value system on its head, because the ways of God are fundamentally opposed to the ways of the world. The Beatitudes offer us a system of behavior that does not allow for the first to always be first and the last to always be last. These Words of Jesus come to pronounce blessing not on the power-brokers, but on those who seek what is right.

Now, go with me to the next Beatitude ... *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy”* or as we have read *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”*

Did you notice the big difference from the previous Beatitudes? The poor in spirit receives the Kingdom, the meek inherit the earth, but those who show mercy receive what they share. Again, we wonder ... *“Who is not merciful?”* Then with a very little thought we think about a parent who cannot extend the word of forgiveness to a son or daughter. We know someone who lost his leg in combat and 50 years later he is full of resentment to the medic who did not offer care. It can also find expression in the woman who is so resentful of others who have children ... she was never able to give birth to a child.

As one writer has suggested, “Jesus knew the meanness of the human condition—how people nurse their inner wounds and carry grudges for years and try to sabotage friends and relatives who are being happy, and look for bizarre ways of wreaking vengeance long after some initial harm was done to them.” (see John Killinger, *“Letting God Bless You”*)

These *Words of Jesus* are the Good News of forgiveness, canceling of debts, acceptance of those who are different, and love found in the blessings of God. Think about the older brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. He had no expression of joy with his lost brother’s return ... it is just a resentful, “you never threw that kind of a party for me”.

Then there was the story when Peter asked Jesus, “How often shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? As many as seven times?” Jesus responds “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Maybe this is a good place to ask some questions. Knowing these are Words of Jesus and we identify with Jesus as Lord and Savior, where do we find mercy in our world? Since we are in that season, is there mercy shown in our political elections? Since it is a hot topic of discussion, where is there mercy in our present tax structure? Since it is a common activity, when did you last see merciful actions while driving your automobile around Phoenix? Since it is a genuine concern in your family and in my family, who demonstrates the mercy of God in their caregiving actions?

But who does not honestly crave for experiences of mercy? Yet, we so often buy into the cultural value of trying to be hard, tough and just plain cruel. It is not so hard to be merciful to a person you thoroughly dislike ... for they shall receive mercy. It is not that difficult to use kind words when the opportunity presents itself at the gas station or at MacDonald’s ... for they shall receive mercy. It is that person who knows the blessings of God and then sees a priority to bring that gift of blessing into the lives of others. Remember, Jesus also instructed us ... to “forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors”.

Let me relate an old preacher story from World War II. A private in the army faithfully read his Bible, prayed every day, and really tried to

live as Jesus taught. His conduct infuriated his tough sergeant, who assigned him extra duties as punishment. But, the young private refused to get angry and continued to be cheerful, pleasant and polite.

One evening when everyone had a pass into town, the private decided to remain behind to write letters and read his Bible. The sergeant stumbled in drunk, and saw the private on his knees. Angry and cursing, the sergeant pulled off his muddy boots and threw them at the young soldier, hitting him on the head.

The next morning, the sergeant awoke with a throbbing headache and a mouth that felt as if it were full of fuzz. His tie had been removed, his collar loosened, and he was covered with a blanket. And there beside his bed sat his boots, cleaned and polished with the best shine they had probably ever had. ***“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”***

Wow, how revolutionary are these Beatitudes? Yes, they challenge me and they challenge you ... as we all seek to live a life that is more Christ-like. Mercy and righteousness are simply a way to love, show compassion for another, and extend that blessing of God.

Several weeks ago someone handed me pages copied from a book. There it is written: “The perfect manner in which to age gracefully for a Christian is to balance a growing spirit against a declining body. Years will hack away some of the physical aspects of your body, but everything that is taken away from you will uncover your spirit—your inner being, that is becoming more like Christ. Older age will show us all what we really are. Maybe you will be surprised by the beauty of your spirit and the strength of your faith, your hope and your love for God.” (See *“Reflection on Aging, A Spiritual Guide”* page 105)

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”*

The ***Words of Jesus*** ... for your lives and for mine.

Deuteronomy 11:13-18; Matthew 5:1-12 (New English Version)

## “Words of Jesus ... Beatitudes IV”

Prayer: *Holy God, we have come this morning to hear again the message of your steadfast love, reminding us that you haven't given up on us. For all our shortcomings, for all of the grief that we must cause you, we are thankful that you welcome us into you're your love and forgiveness with open arms. Speak to us again words of courage, strength, hope, compassion, and love. Amen.*

Peter Gomes, the long-time Pastor of Harvard's Memorial Church, died almost a year ago. In 1998 he wrote that when reading the Beatitudes we face two temptations. “The first is to regard the Beatitudes as a set of principles that might be considered a happier and much improved version of the Ten Commandments. Jesus is offering ‘carrot theology’ rather than ‘stick theology’. But they are not principles, but words of encouragement to ordinary people.

The second temptation is to postpone them into the future. But the message is in the present tense. Now, in this moment you will have happiness and joy. The Kingdom is already here.” (see *Sermons, Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, page 114) Still later Gomes writes “... We like the Beatitudes for here is a recipe for virtue, and if we read it right, use the right ingredients and in the right proportions, it is like we can cook like Julia Child, and who then will need Julia Child? Here is the rub, however. We have all been invited to dinner parties prepared by people who were tutored over the television by Julia Child, but somehow, we admit in our heart of hearts, despite all of the creamery butter, the leeks and that French copper paraphernalia, the meal is not quite the same without Julia in the kitchen.

Once all is said and done, there is more person and personality than principle to cooking; and there is more person and personality than principle in the Beatitudes. The “personality” and person of the Beatitudes and hence so-called authority, rests in the person, the life of Jesus, and in the persons and lives of those who hear, believe and act. These principles without the person of their author and the person to

whom they are addressed mean nothing at all. “ (see *Sermons, Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, page 115)

This morning, we are probing the sixth and seventh of the Beatitudes- “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*” and “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*”

We love these words “the pure in heart” or as Phillips writes, “the utterly sincere, for they will see God!” ... we love knowing we can “see God”. The Greek word for “purity” used here is the word “kathiros”. It appears 27 times in the New Testament and signifies “that which is clean” ... and free from any contaminating substance. These Jews of the first century were obsessed with purity and the Law was full of detailed instructions about how they were to remain pure and they were “set apart” from all their Gentile neighbors. The religious leaders, especially the Pharisees, had devised a whole new set of laws for the people to follow.

But what does it mean to be “pure in heart”? The grandmothers and great-grandmothers would say quickly that to be pure in heart is to be child-like and trust and love everyone. A child’s intention is good, welcoming everyone with endless curiosity about the world. The child lives in the moment, not having yet learned about such qualities as jealousy and pride.

Here are the *Words of Jesus* saying that unless we become like a young child, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard has written (see *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*.) Purity is to be utterly open and sincere; to allow one’s whole life to be transparent before God and others. J.B. Phillips writes, “Blessed are those who are utterly sincere”.

Some of the circumstances of life bring us happiness while other events bring us deep sorrow and pain. And as Christians both happiness and sorrow rest on the bedrock that Jesus Christ suffered, died and rose from the dead and demonstrated our reconciliation to God. God will never take his eye from us and the face of God is always smiling upon you and me.

On the day of our Annual Meeting let me say that this congregation is the triumph of faith, not that we are perfect, but we share a faith that trusts in God's love.

We remember the name Dag Hammarskjold, the Secretary-General of the United Nations. In one of his last writings, he wrote: "I don't know who—or what—put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer 'Yes' to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal." (see *Markings*, page 205)

The meaning in that dark night of the soul is often beyond our understanding but we can trust in God's love. There is meaning beyond ourselves ... in my life and in your lives. Even in our later years, life is so much more than just coping and making adjustments. Mysterious as it may be, there is something awesome and magnificent at the heart of our existence, and it is about love. It is our love for God, love for one another, love for creation, love for life itself.

***The Words of Jesus*** ... "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*"

Now, let's take up the next Beatitude: "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*" In our Bible the word "peace" is a very comprehensive word and is central to the purposes of God. Typically we define peace as the absence of war, which is kind of crazy, because it implies that war is the normal state of things. No war is not the normal, ... peace is the normal state of things. War is the aberration, but typically we define peace as a negative: no war, no conflict, no terrorism, no anxiety.

On the other hand, the biblical word "peace" is always a positive. Peace is wholeness, state of accord, and experiences of harmony. It is harmony in our relationship to God and in all person to person relationships. This is what God longs for and it is what leads to the establishment of the kingdom of God.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus is the agent through whom God made it possible for us to live in harmony with each other and with God. We now have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ and in turn,

God calls us to live in peace with everyone. We are called to be peacemakers with our neighbors, our family, or even acquaintances in our HOA that might not cooperate.

For some this also means they march down the streets in protest of a war our country is involved in. Peacemakers build up; they do not tear down. They do not work at cross-purposes with God in people's lives. In their relationships with people, peacemakers do not gossip. They do not demean and put down others. They do not set others up for failure. They do not discourage or make fun of others. Peacemakers do not fan the flames of hatred or conflict, but peacemakers edify, compliment, encourage, and inspire. They bear burdens, support and forgive others. They sympathize, are compassionate, and seek to understand. What peacemakers do is help others experience God's best.

Scholar Tom Long writes, that like the preamble of the *US Constitution*, the Beatitudes are like a preamble to the Good News. "The Beatitudes proclaim what is, in the light of the kingdom of heaven, unassailably true. They describe the purpose of every holy law, the foundation of every custom, the aim of every practice of this new society, this colony of the kingdom, the church called and instructed by Jesus. It becomes quickly apparent that the Beatitudes turn the world's values upside down. What is true for those who live in the power of the kingdom of heaven is a flat reversal of what is considered to be true in the culture at large." (see commentary *Matthew, Bible Companion Series*, page 57)

Imagine most television ads you will watch during the Super Bowl next Sunday ... and how the good life is pictured? We might even say, if we allow ourselves into the advertisement, happy are, or blessed are those who can afford luxury items. Blessed are those who look young and attractive and surrounded by good friends at a bar. Blessed are the mighty, the powerful, the famous, the self-reliant, for they have all the good things in life. And the Beatitudes are a nearly complete reversal of any television advertisement we can remember or imagine.

Thomas Long goes further and writes, "...that the church, the community of Christ, is a joyful people, but the source of their joy is not that they live easy lives in a happy world or that things are getting better

every day, but that their trust is in God's coming kingdom." (see Long, page 47)

Jesus saw what we could see, but too often ignore. Jesus saw people in the crowd who were poor, both materially and in spirit, ... and people who are mourning. He saw the meek people and people who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and those who were persecuted. He saw people who were reviled and subject to false charges. Jesus not only saw these people he proclaimed them blessed ... the people the culture despised and ignored, Jesus blessed.

In our world Jesus sees the merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers. They do not always stand out in a crowd, but Jesus sees them, and pronounces them blessed. And through them God is at work in this world and will surely bring all creation to a time of peace and rejoicing.

Now, we know that peacemakers often get called by other names. Long-haired hippies, some called those protesting the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Fuzzy-headed dreamers, those who protested the nuclear arms race were called. What do we call the grandmothers and grandfathers who stand on the corner of Bell Road at 99th Ave. proclaiming peace? You may say that I'm a dreamer and Jesus says the name that matters is that peacemakers "*will be called children of God*".

In this life, here and now, we have beautiful glimpses of what it means to be pure in heart and to see God. We see God in the laughter of children, in the blooms of spring, in the neighbor who brings a casserole when we need help. But we also see God in the family who gathers around a dying member, sharing stories, laughter, and tears, ... and perhaps most of all, in the face of the one who lies there, so much closer to seeing God face to face than we are. "*For now we see in a mirror dimly; then we will see face to face.*"

The **Words of Jesus** "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*" ... and "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*"

Peter Gomes has written: "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. What the world knows of God, it will know through us, for better or for worse, we are the good news, the gospel, we are the light of the world ... and we dare not wait for more qualified Christians, better prayers, or better rules to come along and do our shining for us. No, the work of God awaits our hands, the love of God awaits our hearts, and people of God await our fellowship here and now, ordinary and imperfect though we may be.” (p. 119).

The **Words of Jesus** “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*” ... and “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*”

Scriptures: Genesis 1:24-28a, Matthew 5:1-12 (Phillips)

## “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 let’s 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 in the 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 *The 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 than 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 hereafter. 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 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 sooooo goooooood.

***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