

Sermon – February 2, 2020

“Be-Attitudes”

Matthew 5: 1-12

Our text this morning is known to many as The Beatitudes. Beatitudes come from the Latin word *beatus*, meaning blessed, happy, or fortunate. Beatitudes did not originate from the Gospel of Matthew and Luke. In fact, they are common in the Old Testament as wisdom writings particularly in the book of Psalms and Proverbs. New Testament scholar Warren Carter points out that “the beatitudes describe not personal qualities but oppressive situations of distress which are honored because they will be reversed in God’s kingdom. Each beatitude is a gift that calls for our response. They are codes of behaviour for shaping a community of faith in ways that call conventional wisdom into question, subvert the status quo, and intend eventually to re-shape it.” One preacher said the beatitudes are supposed to ‘be’ your ‘attitude’ for rightful living.

I don’t know about you but when I read these verses the first time, they gave me a sense of discomfort. How could someone who is poor in spirit, or the grieving or the hungry and thirsty and those who are put down and oppressed be blessed? What might Matthew be thinking when he portrayed Jesus addressing the crowd that day as to who are blessed, happy and fortunate? Was Jesus condoning poverty and suffering? Was Jesus pushing the people to experience persecution and mockery in order to be blessed? I think of war-torn countries or a mother burying her child. I think of those dying and suffering from dreaded illnesses like the Coronavirus which has become a worldwide concern. I think of those who are in abusive relationships or those who are persecuted because of their gender, race or creed. How could Jesus say that there is any sort of blessing in this messy world? How could Jesus call someone with an empty belly and aching grief blessed? What about those who were on the other side of the fence? The affluent, the educated, the famous and the successful – are they not also blessed? Why did Matthew include these verses in his account of Jesus as preacher? What is the good news of the beatitudes?

Context is very important so we can understand what the story means. What was the first century world like in terms of socio-political, economic and religious conditions? When Jesus preached that day using the mountain as his pulpit, he was speaking to those similar to the “Occupy Movement” of his time. Jesus saw people in trouble, people who were deeply grieved because of economic poverty. Most of them were peasants who were victims of social and economic inequality and empire oppression in general. While there may have been a pinch of wealthy elites in the crowd, the vast majority of people who came to listen to him that day were literally poor. Boggled down by an oppressive system of Roman taxation that had hit the fishing and agriculture communities, people with little food, no health care and little to no opportunities to get ahead. Resources for daily living are slim to none. They were barely eking out a living. We might even wonder why there were so many people who gathered around to hear him preach instead of out on the lake fishing or in the farms farming? I wonder if their nets were old and torn and the farm animals too weak to carry a plow?

Jesus looked at the crowd right in that present moment. People who were in the brink of moral and spiritual depravity. He saw people who lacked zest and passion. They had lost the energy to live. I think Sarah Dylan Breuer nailed it when she said that a better interpretation of the word blessed is not happy or fortunate but “honoured”. Honour and shame in the New Testament world was in large part a function of how important your connections were - your family members, your patrons, and your clients. If you belong to a noble and affluent family, you are highly regarded as important. If you were a peasant, you will always be a peasant the rest of your life. If you weren't connected to a patron who is wealthy and famous, you are nobody. That's serious stuff in those times, because nobody wants to do business with a nobody; being pushed out of your network of social relationships could also mean being left with nothing to live on and no way to get out of that position. Jesus gathers all of these people who are completely bereft and without honour in their culture's world, and he gives them honour and blessings which more than compensate for what they lack in life. And because they are blessed and honoured, Jesus gives them status, declaring that they are children of God. Jesus makes them family – brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers that care for one another.

So when I reflect deeply on those words of blessedness, I am reminded that the context for the Beatitudes is not a bed of roses where the poor were respected. Jesus is preaching to touch and reach out to the lowest people in society. Jesus' offered them words of healing love and restoring lives. Jesus reminded them in a society where people were ignored and marginalized, that no matter how low they were treated, there was still blessedness in them. In saying they were blessed, Jesus was saying, "Do not think you deserve this. Do not think this is what God wants for you. God loves you and you can find comfort in God. Although your current situation is dire, your afflictions will not last forever. He is saying that despite their afflictions, they can be confident that God cares deeply for them, and one day their fortunes will be reversed. It is an assurance of comfort. It is a message of encouragement. It is a promise of hope.

If you ask me what my favourite beatitudes are, I would say verses 6 and 9. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. And Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.* The world is saturated with sad news and events that need us to constantly hunger and thirst for righteousness. Hate crimes still abound. Just days after the commemoration of the 75th year of the liberation of Auschwitz, we've heard in the news that the National Holocaust Monument was defaced and vandalized. Anti-semitism and other acts of racism is still on the rise.

February is Black History Month. What a good way to remember the black community and journey with them in their celebration of their legacy and to recognize their achievements and participation in the world. Here's a story that most of you might remember. A pivotal moment in the life of the Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. happened in 1956. When white opposition was intensifying, Rev. King came home exhausted and discouraged. As he was climbing into bed, the telephone rang. It was a death threat. It was not the first, but this one was chilling. He went downstairs, brewed a pot of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. Feeling that things were falling apart despite having giving his best effort, he prayed. He cried. He prayed. And something happened. King said that night he felt divine presence consoling him and telling him not to be afraid. After that, King accepted the fact that this struggle was going to

be the heart of his ministry. He tackled segregation laws with more vigor than before, and soon embraced peaceful, non-violent tactics. A Quaker peace activist said that when he visited King in early 1956, King's house was filled with an arsenal of weapons. But after that kitchen epiphany, King gave up the guns saying they had to go if he was going to follow God's agenda. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., he said these: "To be blessed, is to live with an unquenchable hope that in the long arc of history justice will prevail because love is more powerful than hate and peace more coveted than strife."

Dear friends, whatever situation you are in, in the midst of hunger or grief or depression, even in the midst of joys and celebrations, may the blessings be with you. The blessings are there with you when you sit in the chair where your loved ones used to relax, just so you can remember the sweetness of their presence. The blessings are there, when you go to your medical treatments not even certain if you're going to make it or not. The blessings are there when the walls of your home seem to be haunted with your ex-spouse and the bitter taste of separation. The blessings are there in the hurts and pains, even in those moments when you question your faith. The blessings are there as you wake up each morning, as you share your stories with those who need to listen. The blessings are there when you gather your family with a prayer and a meal, with words of encouragement and affirmation. The blessings are there. And because each one is blessed, it is my hope that we will bless others and the world. That's where good stewardship comes in. And being good stewards, may you, like Jesus, be advocates and proponents of the "be-attitudes". Be compassionate, be kind, be loving, be just, be the people of goodness and love. Blessed are you. Amen.

Sources:

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Alyce Mackenzie – patheos.org

Charles Marsh, "MLK's Theology Recovered: 'Kitchen Epiphany' Was Presence of Jesus," in *Vital Theology*, February 1, 2005, p.4.