

Living in the Spirit

Matthew 5:1-12

Our scripture this morning is the opening for Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Most of us we have heard all our lives. I remember seeing one in a different light when I attended camp as a youth and girls from one church used the one about hungering and thirsting for righteousness as part of their table grace. I also remember this scripture as a few years back the Disciples Women's Ministries used them as a season's long bible study.

These first verses are referred to as the Beatitudes or God's blessings. Jesus delivered these blessings to an audience of followers made up of his newly called disciples and others who made up the crowd. These were people who lived in the Roman Empire and whose worship and religious activities were dictated by the elite Jewish establishment. What Jesus teaches in the Beatitudes redefines what should be the response to both the Roman and Jewish environments of the groups upon whom these blessings were pronounced. Those who receive God's favor are not the privileged classes of the Roman Empire or the Jewish establishment. The Beatitudes are spoken to those groups whom God deemed worthy, not by virtue of their own achievements or status in society, but because God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the forgotten, the despised, the justice seekers, the peace makers, and those persecuted because of their beliefs.

When Jesus taught this message about whom God blesses he organized around the pursuit of righteousness by those who are able—at potential risk to their own lives—for the sake of a world in which the unvalued (including they themselves when they are persecuted) were at last fully valued as human beings." These opening verses provide a commissioning that undergirds the necessary instructions

(the rest of the Sermon) for Jesus' chosen disciples and others in the crowd who desired to follow Jesus. As Jesus pronounced God's blessings, he framed the call to discipleship in terms of both who they were to be (their character) and its consequences for their lives.

The heart of the Beatitudes is a call to be disciples who live out the virtues of the blessings in pursuit of righteousness grounded in God's righteousness; God's steadfast love, God's goodness, God's justice, and God's mercy. God's blessings are our command, because God first loved us, giving us the blessing of Jesus Christ, our salvation. **Marcia Y. Riggs**

Whenever we hear the Beatitudes, we are struck with their poetic beauty and, at the same time, overwhelmed by their perceived impracticality for the world in which we live. We admire the instruction, but we fear the implications of putting the words into actual practice. We live in a time when the blessings given are to those who succeed, often at the expense of others. To be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful, and meek will get you nowhere in a culture grounded in competition and fear. Perhaps this is why most references to the Beatitudes imply that in giving this instruction, Jesus was literally turning the values of the world upside down. Who can survive in attempting to live into the spirit of the Beatitudes?

The answer resides not in their impracticality but in their *practicality*. We often approach them as an impossible challenge for ordinary living. Only the greatest of saints are up to the task. We think of those who have a special religious calling like monks, nuns, and others who leave the everyday environment for long periods of meditation, prayer and fasting. Or we wait for the occasional figures like Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and Desmond Tutu to show us the way. In the meantime, the world does not get any better, and we remain unfulfilled in our pale

expressions of Christian discipleship. The truth is that Jesus meant the Beatitudes to be for everyone. But, how can such a task be accomplished in our own time?

Living daily into the spirit of the Beatitudes involves looking at them as a collection of the whole, rather than looking at each one individually. Each is related to the others, and they build on one another. Those who are meek or humble are more likely to hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they remain open to continued knowledge of God. When we approach the Beatitudes this way, we see they invite us into a way of being in the world that leads to particular practices. There are three principles for living into the spirit of the Beatitudes: simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion. These three principles allow us to be in the world, while not being totally shaped by it. We offer an alternative to what the world seems to be pursuing.

Responding to Jesus' instruction, *simplicity* has little to do with lack of sophistication. It has to do with hearing the words of Jesus for what they are, not what we would prefer them to be. We might say that we are open to hearing this teaching for what it simply is, rather than layering it with our own prejudices and subjectivity. This includes the prejudice of already deciding that the task at hand is impossible. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard made reference to the importance of hearing the Gospel in a "primitive way," stripped of all refinements that we so often bring to any difficult text, in order to avoid its meaning. To approach the Beatitudes simply is to hear the words clearly, without prejudice, and to know that the words are spoken directly to us; you and me. We do receive more courage than fear when we hear Jesus saying, "You are blessed in this life whenever you demonstrate humility, bring a peaceful presence, open your heart to others, and show mercy on those who cry for it." Hearing Jesus' words, simply spoken, is the first principle for living into the spirit of the Beatitudes.

There is little disagreement on the lack of *hopefulness* in our world. The distinguished theologian Jürgen Moltmann stated that the death knell of the church is when the overall attitude moves from anger to cynicism. Cynicism differs from anger. Cynicism has decided to accept whatever is, regardless of the consequences. Cynicism offers little hope that things will get better. The mantra is "Do not worry about it. That is just the way things are. You will get used to it." The Beatitudes invite us to the opposite point of view, which is hopefulness. We place our hope on Christ, who offered hope to the hopeless. We are able to approach the world with a spirit of hope, even when the outward signs indicate otherwise. When we are hopeful, we stand in the world sure of the possibility that the day will come when mercy, humility, peace, and love are the descriptions of what it means to live.

The third principle of Beatitude living is *compassion*. Compassion is not associated with either pity or sympathy. It goes deeper. To have pity on another person means that you feel sorry for them. Sympathy means that you understand what another person is experiencing, and so you offer some advice. The late Henri Nouwen offers an insightful description: compassion "grows with the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts through all walls which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end." We are distinct, but more importantly, we share that gift of being created in God's image; so we belong to one another as family. Compassion requires not walking the same path with a companion, but walking in his or her shoes.

For us, this means we apply the Beatitudes within the life of our congregation as we look for ways to study together, be in common prayer together, and be in

mutual service together for the congregation to grow as a blessed community.

Charles James Cook

M. Claire Clyburn, in a sermon she entitled “Kingdom Living for Kingdom People” tells the story of Philip and Barbara. They joined a church when they moved to a new town because it seemed like the thing to do. They went most Sundays if they were in town. They enjoyed being helpful and using their gifts to serve within the congregation. When their children were born, they brought them to church. The pastor was happy to talk to them about raising their children in a Christian home. It was a very happy time in their lives and in the life of the congregation.

One evening Philip was late arriving home from a business trip. Barbara was anxious but knew he would call if anything was amiss. This was the time before everyone had a cell phone. When the phone rang at 11:30 PM, she expected it to be Philip explaining his delay. She was not prepared for the voice on the other end of the phone, distant and clinical, that informed her of Philip’s tragic death in a traffic accident. Numb and in shock, Barbara called her pastor. Within hours people were in and out of her home, bringing food, taking care of the children, answering the phone. In the weeks to come, she only vaguely remembered the funeral. She was on automatic pilot as she tried to feed and dress her toddlers. After some months, Barbara found herself with an exhausting, but seemingly manageable schedule.

On day, Barbara found herself standing up and telling her story. She was appreciative of all the church members had done for her, but she continued to need help. “When I brought my children to be church, you promised to help me raise them in the faith. I need your help. I cannot do it alone.” A full minute passed in silence. A couple stood and offered to keep her children once a week. One man,

an accountant, offered to help her organize her finances. Another person offered a monthly meal. The congregation rallied around Barbara and her children.

Sound impossible? What's even more impossible is believing that we must face the challenges of life alone. Living in the spirit means living in community, which brings peace and forgiveness, and where mercy is practiced and justice is longed for. Jesus never intended us to try to follow his teachings in a vacuum, the church is his gift to us, which makes it possible for us to living in the spirit.

Living into the spirit of the Beatitudes with a commitment to simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion is something that we can all do. In the process, we discover this is not irrational or impossible at all. It is the only truly rational approach to living. **Charles James Cook**

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