

Worship Leader 1: When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. Then Jesus began to speak, and taught them, saying:

Worship Leader 2: Blessed are the poor in spirit...
Everyone: For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Worship Leader 1: Blessed are those who mourn...
Everyone: For they will be comforted.

Worship Leader 2: Blessed are the meek...
Everyone: For they will inherit the earth.

Worship Leader 1: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...
Everyone: For they will be filled.

Worship Leader 2: Blessed are the merciful...
Everyone: For they will receive mercy.

Worship Leader 1: Blessed are the pure in heart...
Everyone: For they will see God.

Worship Leader 2: Blessed are the peacemakers...
Everyone: For they will be called children of God.

Worship Leader 1: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...
Everyone: For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Worship Leader 2: Jesus said: 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. Matthew 5.1-12

“It’s been a quiet week in my hometown of Lake Woebegone” is how humorist Garrison Keillor used to begin the weekly radio saga of his hometown. Those words signaled that listeners were in for another funny and heart-touching story of people we’d never know, of a place we’d never go (because Lake Woebegone only existed in Keillor’s imagination.) In last week’s gospel story from Matthew, Jesus appeared after a

long absence (about twenty-two years,) right after John the Baptist was arrested. Matthew sets the scene, as if he'd written, "It was an interesting week in my hometown of Galilee," so we know we're in for a good story.

When Jesus appeared at Galilee, His first words were: "Change your hearts and lives! God's Kingdom is here!" He called the first disciples to follow Him, and as they traveled, Jesus taught in the synagogues, and healed people of every kind of illness and disease... showing and telling what God's Kingdom looked like. Everywhere Jesus went crowds of people followed Him, wanting to hear about the God of love and mercy, wanting to experience healing and forgiveness, wanting to see... the face of God.

Not everyone in the crowds who followed Jesus was His friend, or interested in His radical message... as we move closer to the season of Lent, we'll hear more about Jesus' enemies, and those who were unsettled by His teaching. But in today's gospel story Jesus has gathered everyone around Him, and He sits down to teach them, which was the position of a teacher in the ancient world. Our image is Jesus standing on a mountaintop delivering a message to the people below Him, but Jesus sat with the crowds and taught them.

When someone delivers shocking or surprising news, especially over the phone, they're likely to say, "Are you sitting down?" Fortunately Jesus' listeners were already sitting down as He delivered this shocking and surprising message about God's kingdom. His listeners would have known the Law of Moses, which in the 3rd century became the 613 Laws of Torah, which every Jew was required to observe. I mention the 613 laws because even at this time the Israelites lived under the unbending Mosaic Law, strictly and exactly upheld by the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees, the

religious leaders. These Laws, and the leaders who enforced them, told everyone their place in the synagogue, in the world, and in God's Kingdom.

There are some things in Matthew's story that don't resonate with us. There are some major cultural differences between us and the ancient near-east. That world was shame-based (one's behavior brought either shame or honor on all of one's family and ancestors; it was accepted that it was God who caused the fortunes and misfortunes of people who either pleased or angered God; and poverty, illness, and disaster, were understood as punishment for sin, and a sign of God's disfavor. What we do have in common with the ancient near-east is our shared belief that power and money are signs of God's blessings; and highly sought-after signs of God's favor.

Jesus delivered a surprising and shocking message about the Kingdom of God. Are you sitting down? Good. Because what Jesus said was not what His first hearers expected, nor it is what we'd like to hear. Let's hear again what Jesus said, on page 3 of the bulletin. I'll read a line, and you respond.

Blessed are the poor in spirit...

Everyone: For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn...

Everyone: For they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek...

Everyone: For they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...

Everyone: For they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful...

Everyone: For they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart...

Everyone: For they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers...

Everyone: For they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...

Everyone: For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I always loved to hear Garrison Keillor say, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Woebegone, my hometown" because no matter how he spun the story, in the end everything turned out okay. It hasn't been a quiet week or a peaceful month, here in my home country of America. We have become a more sharply-divided and antagonistic and fearful people under some of the laws and decrees of the new administration. The upside of this disquiet and upheaval is that the Church is being called to seek Jesus, and the will of God, more intentionally than before - no matter what party we belong to, no matter how we vote - we are searching and praying to know how to follow Jesus in these challenging times; how to be the beloved Body of Christ in spite of our differences; and to understand what the Kingdom of God looks like. It helps to have the Beatitudes before us.

In some translations of the beatitudes, the word "blessed" has been made "happy" but the Aramaic meanings of this word are honored, privileged, and fortunate. Jesus said, "Blessed" (honored, privileged, and fortunate) "Are the poor in spirit; and those who mourn; and the meek; and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; and the merciful; and the pure in heart; and the peacemaker." As is so often true of bible stories, Jesus' message is cryptic, and we have to dig deeper into the meaning of His words. For instance, He doesn't mention that these blessings will be fulfilled when the Kingdom of God is fulfilled. "The Kingdom of God is here" Jesus said... but it's clear to all of us that the Kingdom of God is not yet fully here. Theologians call this in-between space we live - where glimpses of God's Kingdom come-on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven exist alongside cruelty, war, oppression, and hopelessness - this is called "the already and the not yet." The Kingdom of God has begun... but it's not all here. Not yet.

Being poor, or submissive, or grief-stricken, or desperate for justice, or having an undivided heart, or choosing peace over revenge, are not what we understand as blessings in this life. Blessings are health, wealth, independence, the pursuit of happiness, and success. Are you sitting down? Good. Because God's values are upside down and in order to see what's truly blessed we might need to stand on our heads. Jesus was looking past where humankind could see... He was looking at the final reign of God, and so to understand the "Blessings" we have to look where Jesus was looking. Jesus was looking at the end of this world as we know it, and the fulfillment of God's Kingdom on earth. Since it's pretty much impossible to imagine the end of the world as we know it, it helps to remember that at all times and in all situations, God is with us, and nothing can separate us from God's love.

One of the misunderstandings of the beatitudes is that Jesus is teaching that being poor and submissive and heartbroken are good things, things we should aspire to (and we don't want to but we think we should want to.) Instead Jesus showed what God's Kingdom is like when He healed all kinds of illness, and touched the diseased, and put human need above the Law, and ate and drank with disreputable women and men, and welcomed children. He was severely condemned for all this behavior because it conflicted with the cultural and religious understanding of what was blessed and what was cursed; what God was pleased by, and what God hated.

Jesus was always inviting people to stand on their heads (not literally but figuratively) to get a new perspective, a right perspective, of God's Kingdom. The blessings Jesus talked about, as well as the way He lived, show and tell us that God doesn't value what we value. Jesus invites us, as He invited the listeners He sat with

and taught, to see God's brokenheartedness over the poor; God's solidarity with the oppressed, the powerless, and those at the end of their rope; and God's partiality for those who have nothing to depend on but God. These are God's special people, the ones who in the coming Kingdom will be honored, and privileged, and blessed.

What can we learn from those who are "blessed"? We can practice looking for God in the poor, the brokenhearted, the humble, the seeker, the merciful, the peacemaker, the helpless, and the hopeless. What can they teach us about depending on God for our identity and security? We can prayerfully learn to see all people through God's eyes as our brothers and sisters, who share our common human life. We can, with God's help and the support of our faith community, hold up our values next to God's values, and pray that God will grow in us lasting and life-giving values. We can look at those who will, in God's coming Kingdom, be honored, privileged, and blessed, and see if any of their abilities or disabilities are in us. We might take on, learn, and practice, one of the "blessings"... of being poor in spirit, or mournful over the condition of the world, or humble, or a seeker of righteousness, or tenderhearted towards all others, or having an undivided heart, or of choosing peace over war.

This story of the beatitudes is just a part of the teachings of Jesus. Next Sunday there will be more cause to remain seated as again Jesus invites us to turn our worldview upside down in order to catch glimpses of the coming Kingdom of God.

I can't say it's been a quiet week in my town, or in my country, but I can say that challenging times are always opportunities for God's people to come together, to sing, and pray, to be loved and forgiven, to learn from the Master, Jesus, what it is to be blessed in the Kingdom of God, and to remember God's two most important rules... that

we love God with every part of us, and that we love others the way we most deeply long to be loved.

Listen again to the “Blessings” - this time from the Message translation:

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and God’s rule.

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.

You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are - no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. God’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.

You’re blessed when you get your inside world - your mind and heart - put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.”

This week let’s reflect on what it is to be blessed in God’s Kingdom, and how we might be recipients of “Blessings.” Amen.