

LEARNING THE WAY: A series on the Sermon on the Mount

“The Most Important Lesson”

Genesis 12:1-3 and Matthew 5:1-12

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Sunday, January 15, 2107

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In the month of January, we are focusing on the gospel according to Matthew. Today is the first of six Sundays where we dig deeper into the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5, 6, and 7.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with words of blessing. And in our first reading from Genesis, you heard words of blessing along with a fundamental principle of our life as God’s people: we are blessed in order to be a blessing to others.

God gives us the gift of life, with the hope that we would use our life well, to serve other people. God gives us time, talent, and treasure, and our calling is to be good stewards of these things, for the sake of other people. God loves us, so that we might love others. We are blessed to be a blessing.

This sort of blessing is logical, it feels right. The blessings that Jesus proclaim in our gospel reading do not have that same feeling. They don’t seem to make sense in a world where those with power and money and health and popularity are the ones who are “blessed.” Listen for God’s word.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Do you have a favorite gospel? Each of our four narratives about the life and ministry of Jesus is different.

Mark is the shortest (!) which makes it a favorite of some. It is an action packed narrative, with Jesus moving quickly from healing to confrontation to teaching. And Mark has an open-ended conclusion.

Luke emphasizes Jesus' concern for the poor and the outcast, and has some of the best loved verses: the parable of the Good Samaritan, the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Road to Emmaus narrative.

John is more poetic and reflective than the other gospels, with powerful narratives like the woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery. Plus John has Jesus' "I am" statements: the bread of life, the light of the world.

And then there is Matthew, our focus gospel this month. The Greek word for Matthew is similar to disciple, which means "learner." In Matthew Jesus does a lot of teaching. There are five extended collections of teachings in Matthew—the first one being the Sermon on the Mount.

And only Matthew has the parable of the sheep and goats, where Jesus says "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat." And only Matthew has the Great Commission, the final words of Jesus in the gospel: words we share at baptisms, the words inscribed on the artwork right outside this sanctuary. Go and make disciples of all nations, baptize them, and teach them, and remember I am with you always."

Not only does Matthew conclude with the promise of God being with us always but it begins that way as well. One name for Jesus is to be Emmanuel, which means "God with us."

So each gospel is a little different. And each gospel introduces Jesus' ministry in a different way.

In Mark, Jesus begins healing people right from the beginning. In Luke, Jesus goes to the temple and reads from Isaiah: God has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. In John, Jesus goes to a wedding party and turns water into wine, the first of several signs of something new.

In Matthew, Jesus goes up on a mountain, with his disciples and a crowd, and he begins to teach. His first teaching, the first of five extended teaching sections, is our focus in these weeks—The Sermon on the Mount.

What is surprising and wonderful about this collection of teachings is how they begin. When people think of religious teaching, they often assume it's a long list of "thou shalt NOTs" in order to earn God's favor (and not have any fun in life.) But the Sermon on the Mount doesn't begin like that at all. In fact it begins with these words of blessing. No imperative, all indicative.

Blessed are the downtrodden: the poor in spirit, for those who mourn, for those who are persecuted. And blessed are those who are humble and compassionate: the pure in heart, the merciful, the peacemakers.

This is what doesn't make sense.

When we think of blessing, we think of material things and good health. We count our blessings at Thanksgiving and other times. We write about our blessings in our Christmas newsletters. We don't talk about our brokenness or our humility as signs of being blessed.

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Have you ever met someone who describes themselves as blessed?

If I remember correctly, one of the first times I heard someone say "I'm blessed" is when I was helping with to lead a worship service inside the Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary, in central Pennsylvania, a maximum security federal prison, a place where serious criminals go for a long time.

I was there with other college students on a Sunday morning for a worship service, and while I don't remember the specifics, I do remember being surprised at how upbeat and friendly most of the prisoners were, despite their circumstances. I didn't expect to see so many smiles. At least a couple talked about how they felt blessed.

As far as I can remember the only people I've heard say "I'm blessed" are people who don't seem blessed by the standards of the world.

Since that time in the prison, I've also heard people at soup kitchens, homeless shelters, poor rural communities in Central America, church people in Appalachia, and in various inner city churches say "I am blessed."

They feel blessed.... And they don't have a nice house in the suburbs, with a flat screen TV and fancy recliner with a cup holder, or an iPhone 7, or a well-diversified stock portfolio... And yet, many people, who don't seem blessed by the world's standards are boldly proclaiming that they are.

I think McCormack Seminary professor Anna Case Winters is on to something. I put her words in the bulletin today:

The beatitudes in Matthew 5.3-12 "are a kind of report from the other side of radical commitment for those who have entered into life within God's community of love and justice. For those who have 'crossed over' there is a genuine blessedness. They are living—even now—in the reign of God."

What these people who self-identify as blessed seem to have in common is a strong sense of God's presence with them, an awareness that God's kingdom, God's reign, is breaking into the world. Sure they probably wouldn't mind having less hunger or poverty or prison, but they know, in the midst of their challenges, they feel God is with them and they live in HOPE. And this is the most important lesson.

Listen to how some of these blessings sound in *The Message*, a paraphrase of the Bible by Eugene Peterson.

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his 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. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

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

Sometime this week, someone is probably going to ask you: "How are you?" Even if you don't say it out loud, I hope you'll know that, no matter what your circumstance, you are blessed. Amen.