

## “BLESSED”

Matthew 5:1-12 Jan. 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017

A Sunday School teacher asked her young students if anyone could tell the class what the Beatitudes are. While the rest of the class thought about the possible answer, little Suzy, raised her hand excitedly, fairly bursting with the answer. “Oh, Teacher, I know, I know, I know! The Beatitudes are the attitude we ought to be at!”

Christ became one like us for two reasons: to rescue us from the slavery of sin and to show us how to live. There is no better place in all of the gospels where he passes on this knowledge than in the Beatitudes. So Suzy’s answer makes sense, doesn’t it? “The attitude we ought to be at” and the Beatitudes can teach us how to get there!

There is some basic information which we ought to realize about the Beatitudes. First of all, the Sermon on the Mount is not one single sermon which Jesus preached on one definite occasion; it is instead the summary of his consistent teaching to his disciples over the course of time. In last week’s gospel, we heard him calling his first disciples. It would be totally logical that, having selected his band of followers, he would take them aside for a period of intensive training before they too would be sent forth to preach his message. Another clue to support this meaning can be found in today’s gospel where it says that Jesus began to teach his disciples when he had sat down. “When a Jewish Rabbi was teaching officially he sat down. We still speak of a professor’s chair; the Pope still speaks ‘excathedra’, that is, from his seat. Often a Rabbi taught when he was standing or moving around; but his really official teaching was done when he had taken his seat. So, then, the very act of Jesus sitting down indicates that this teaching is central and official.”

The second thing is that each of the beatitudes are not really statements but exclamations. A more correct translation would be “O the blessedness of...” The implications of this difference are significant. The difference is: “the blessedness which belongs to the Christian is not a blessedness which is postponed to some future world of glory; it is a blessedness which exists here and now. It is not something into which the Christian *will* enter; it is something into which he has (*already*) entered.”

Lastly, we should know something about the word for blessed in Greek which is **makarios**. “Makarios describes that joy which has its secret within itself, that joy which is serene and untouchable, and self-contained, that joy which is completely independent of all the chances and the changes of life. The English word happiness gives its own case away. It contains the root ‘hap’ which means chance. Human happiness is something which is dependent on the chances and the changes of life, something which life may give and which life may also destroy. The Christian blessedness is completely untouchable and unassailable. ‘No one,’ said Jesus, ‘will take your joy from you.’ (Jn. 16:22).”

In a commentary on this scripture by Rev. Dawn Chesser, she references the current social media phenomenon around #blessed. Some of you may be familiar with this but it blind-sided me. She was struck by the sheer volume of sports references associated with this tag:

*A night I've always dreamed of...tonight is m homecoming playing the Titans. #blessed*

*5 catches, 136 receiving yards, 3 touchdowns on my senior night.*

*Hard work paid off. #blessed*

*Blessed to receive an offer from the University of North Carolina*

*#Blessed*

*Very excited for next year blessed to be a part of the [rugby team]  
for 2017 #blessed*

But it isn't just the sports stars. It's all kinds of people!!

*Happiness is finding leftover chipotle in the fridge that you'd forgotten  
about. #blessed*

*As long as I was able to encourage/inspire at least one person, then I did  
what I was supposed to do #blessed*

*Thank you God for all the blessings. #Blessed*

There is one from Upper Room! *Be a blessing each and every day #blessed*

Lots of stars on Twitter are feeling #blessed by their opportunities to be in movies, on television, and in concert. There are families starting vacations and ending them, all feeling #blessed. #blessed appears for babies being born, for the Starbucks drive-through, and for getting an extra McNugget at McDonald's. Not having been involved myself in all this, I have to admit I'm a little taken aback. One thing is clear though; this is not what Jesus meant when he used the word "Blessed" as the opening word of his teaching ministry. And this is a different way of looking at the Beatitudes than we may be accustomed to doing.

When Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," he isn't making a statement of cause and effect. He isn't saying you are blessed with the kingdom of heaven *because* you are poor in spirit. He isn't saying you are blessed with comfort *because* you are in mourning.

What Jesus is doing here is *pronouncing a blessing* on the people who have gathered as he begins to teach. He is giving a blessing to all the people who have come to hear him. He is blessing them for a purpose. He is blessing them to think differently about the way the world works because of what he is teaching and

doing. He is describing how we are to live as God's people in this world-not simply by calling attention to all the many ways God has #blessed us personally --but by, as Upper Room's tweet put it so succinctly, "being a blessing for others."

This was a radically new teaching for the people in Jesus' day. In the ancient world, just like today, many people believed strongly in cause and effect. They believed that if they were good people who followed God's commandments, worked hard, and tried to do their best in all circumstances, God would reward them with good health, food to eat, stable jobs, happy families, and prosperity. Likewise, they believed that God punished the sinful with illness, poverty, imprisonment, blindness, divorce, and other personal tragedy. Many believed that God even punished entire sinful populations through war, famine, droughts, and other disasters.

If a man was sick, or mourning, or poor in spirit, or starving, or persecuted, it was his own fault for sinning. A woman who suffered did so as the consequence of her own bad behavior because suffering was understood as punishment for sin. But Jesus is saying it doesn't work like that in the kingdom of God. It isn't that we are wrong to feel #blessed when something goes our way. But when things do not go our way, that doesn't mean God is punishing us either. God's kingdom is a whole different playing field.

Jesus blesses everyone who has gathered, no matter who they are and no matter what they have done. God's blessing in Christ is not just for the righteous ones. God's blessing is not just for certain religious groups, or certain genders, or certain sexual orientations, or certain cultural or racial groups. God's blessing is not just for those who are pure, who go to church or give to charities and treat people with kindness. And God's blessing is not evidenced by a big bank account or a fancy title or a luxury home.

In this new kingdom that Jesus is showing us, God blessed the saints and sinners alike. Jesus offers a blessing on the poor in wallet and the poor in spirit. He blesses the blind, the lame, the imprisoned, the outcast. He blessed the leper and the prostitute. He blesses the murderer and the thief and the adulterer. He blesses the Jews and the Christians, the Muslims and the Hindus, the Buddhists and the Ba’hai. He blesses the Democrats and the Republicans and the Independents alike. In Christ, God’s blessing does not discriminate. God’s blessing is for all. God’s blessing is for you. God’s blessing is for me.

That’s good news, don’t you think? It means that no matter who you are or what you have done, you are blessed and you are welcomed into God’s family, And there is nothing you can do, ever, to lose God’s love, affirmation, and blessing.

#blessing is our identity

#blessed is our condition

#blessed is who we are because of God’s saving love in Jesus  
Christ

So in this first teaching for his followers, his disciples, in his first teaching for you and for me, Jesus is telling us as clearly as he can that *these people* --- “look around you,” he says to his disciples—*these people* in the crowd that *gathered* that day near the shores of the Galilean lake—*these people* who live down the street and let their kids run wild, *these people* who don’t work and are collecting welfare, *these people* who are in jail for dealing drugs, *these people* who got pregnant out of wedlock and now want an abortion, *these people* who are members of a gang, *these people* who are members of a white supremacist group, *these people* who are chanting #black lives matter, *these people* who sit in judgment, *these people* who pray to Allah, *these people* who are crazy femin-

ists, *these people* who are pro-life, *these people* who are pro-choice...well, you get the idea! Jesus is telling his disciples that ALL THESE PEOPLE are #blessed.

And we who call ourselves disciples, followers of Jesus Christ, need to not just understand this, but we need to like it out by our words and our actions. We are #blessed in order that we may be a blessing to others says the tweet from the Upper Room. Right on!

The lessons from the Beatitudes are well exemplified by the following true story which was shared on 60 Minutes, CBS News, January 17, 1999.

Except for her passionate love of South Africa, Amy Biehl was a typical Southern California kid, a straight A student and college diving champion who would end her outbursts against apartheid with the words “Free Mandela!” So it was not surprising that when she won a Fulbright Scholarship, she opted to go to South Africa and immerse herself in the country’s culture and politics.

But her young life ended abruptly in 1994 when she was stoned and stabbed to death by a mob of angry, young, black militants. She was killed by the very people whose lot in life she was trying to improve.

Instead of being angry with her murderers, her parents did something so atypical that it boggles the mind. The Biehls dealt with their grief by doing what they believe their daughter would have wanted: understand the fury that drove the mob, forgive the killers, and become, in effect, the patron saints of the village that her very killers came from. Her parents, Linda and Peter Biehl, decided they had to try and understand their daughter’s commitment to the people for whom she had given her life. They read her diaries, in which she wrote about her admiration for those who

were suffering under apartheid. The Biehls and their three other children decided they had to go to South Africa.

Linda attended the trial of Amy's killers. They visited the squatter camps of Guguletu, the black township where Amy's killers had grown up.

They came to understand how those squalid conditions could have led them to violence. Linda went into the home of one of the murderers and met with his mother. She says that after hugging her, "I walked out of that home. There was a rainbow in the sky. My heart was very light.

I felt I had come to terms. And if that is forgiveness, I felt it. And I felt--you know, I felt---I feel at peace with myself. So to me, that's forgiveness."

When asked about the Biehl's forgiveness, Rhoda Khadalie, one of Amy's professors in South Africa and a close friend said "It is a gift from God that they can forgive the killers of their daughter, meet with the mother, go into the homes of the killers and understand who they are and where they come from." Not only did they understand, they spent much of their time in Guguletu, passing the very spot where their daughter was killed. What they've done to carry on for her is to establish the non-profit Amy Biehl Foundation. With \$1/2 million in grants, donations, and their own money, they have sponsored 15 programs which involve thousands of young people, all in the very community where their daughter was killed.

What the Biehls are doing is widely known in South Africa, and like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, everyone marvels at it. "The [Biehl's have] turned it all upside down," Tutu said. "It is the victims, in the depth of

their own agony and pain, who are saying, ‘The community which produced these murderers, we want to help that community be trans-figured.’” The twelve-year-old sister of one of the murderers is enrolled in the after-school program. And when her brother and the other two murderers applied for amnesty after serving four years in jail, Peter and Linda did not object, even though they could have blocked the release.

What an amazing, remarkable story of blessing others, even when being in such pain and going thru such loss!! I’m thinking you get the point. This is the message of the beatitudes. The beatitudes speak of that joy which seeks us through our pain, that joy which sorrow and loss, pain and grief, are powerless to touch, that joy which shines through tears, and which nothing in life or death can take away. The world can win its joys, and the world can equally lose its joys. A change in fortune, a collapse in health, the failure of a plan, the disappointment of an ambition, even a change in the weather, can take away the fickle joy the world can give. But the Christian has the serene and untouchable joy which comes from walking forever in the company and in the presence of Jesus Christ. The greatness of the beatitudes is that they aren’t some wistful glimpses of some future beauty; they are not even golden promises of some distant glory; they are triumphant shouts of bliss for a permanent joy that nothing in the world can ever take away.

We are called by the Beatitudes to achieve inner peace in our own lives. No matter what challenges face us, we can overcome them and “turn them upside down”, as Archbishop Tutu said. Sin is a separation from our fellow human beings. The Biehls could very easily have let their normal, human feelings of



anger, resentment, hatred and bitterness over the loss of their daughter take control of their lives and separate them from the people of Guguletu and her murderers. But they used understanding and forgiveness to transcend these feelings. Although there is nothing that will ever bring their daughter back to life (and that grief will always be with them), they have used her death to “adopt” many more children in that village and give them the possibility of a prosperous life which would never have been possible before. They have given us a vivid example of what we must do if we are to live our own lives in imitation of the example of Christ who gave his own life that we might become adopted children of God and heirs of eternal life in heaven. Our lives must be a constant striving to make the Beatitudes the “attitudes that we are at”.

So do you hear Jesus? Can you hear him speaking to you? Can you hear him saying, “YOU ARE BLESSED”?

Closing—walk through the sanctuary and offer a blessing to the people in the pews. Make eye contact with everyone and make my way to the back rows. Blessed are YOU. Blessed are YOU. Blessed are You.