

Year A Epiphany 4 Blessed are Those...But How are We Blessed Matthew 5 vv1 to 12

These are the “Beatitudes” that we have just heard from Jesus. The word comes from the Latin, *beatitudo*, and it means “blessedness”. Jesus is speaking blessings to the people and he can do this because Matthew has revealed to us that Jesus holds a position of authority.

So far in Matthew, in Jesus’ short public life, he has been baptized and acknowledged as God’s Son. He has been tempted by Satan in the wilderness and prevailed. He has called four of his disciples who immediately drop what they are doing to follow him, and then he has gone about Galilee teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news of God’s arriving kingdom, and curing all the people’s sicknesses. Large crowds, we are told, are now flocking to him and, today, we hear what he has to say to them.

Jesus teaches them, Matthew says, beginning with listing who is blessed. Let’s first clear up the meaning of this word, “blessed”. Like other commonly used words and phrases in churchland, this word has accumulated layers of meaning over the years and the top layer is now obscuring the bottom layers. It’s like building an ice cream sundae with layers of chocolate sauce, fruit, nuts, whipped cream, and a cherry on top but then coming to think of a sundae as meaning the cherry on top, forgetting that its foundational layer is the ice cream. The Hebrew word that is translated as our word, “bless,” is the word “barak” (baw-rak) and it means “to kneel”. More specifically, we kneel in praise and adoration. God’s blessing to Abraham is the pivotal blessing in the Hebrew Scriptures – it is God’s promise, through Abraham, to us. God says to Abraham he will be blessed and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. Blessed – in other words, God will adore us just as we adore God. We give ourselves to God just as God has

given Godself to us. Being in the loving, protecting embrace of God, we know joy and contentment. God desires to lavish gifts on us because of his love for us.

Eventually, we forgot about the ice cream and came to see the cherry on top as the blessing – all of the good things in life are “blessings” from God. The problem with this thinking is that, if good things are blessings from God then bad things must mean God is unhappy or angry with us. This leads to the thinking that God can do bad things to people or to the world. Worse still, people then think that there must not be a God when bad things happen since a good God would give us “cherries on top.”

Being in a mutually adoring relationship with God does not mean we will be nothing but rich and happy and that we are immune from the hardships of life. Even the strongest, most loving relationship will experience hardships – financial troubles, sickness, death, arguments, flat tires, and bad hair days. But the strong, loving relationship will be the rock in the midst of troubles...the ice cream that is the blessing. God is leading us and all of creation toward the perfection God intends. In the meantime, we have the ice cream – in relationship with God, adoring God, being adored by God...blessed.

Jesus tells us today the long list of those who are blessed by God – loved and adored by God. And, it is a list of those in society who do not have the cherries on top, those who do not, by our skewed thinking of blessings, do not seem to have God’s blessing. But they are blessed – loved and adored by God – and Jesus, with the authority Matthew has shown to us that he has, is providing hope, and the joy that comes from that hope. Jesus is telling the people they are adored and, more importantly in their struggles, Jesus tells them they will have the cherry on top.

They will, on the long-awaited Day of the Lord, experience the happiness of having enough food, of having all their needs met, of being free from sickness and death. Right now, it feels like only the wealthy and powerful are blessed. Jesus says, “No – you *are* blessed”. “Rejoice and be glad,” he says, “for your reward is great in heaven.” Heaven – the mysterious place where God’s will and God’s kingdom are already perfect. Heaven – the place that we pray, together each week, will come on earth as well.

Many Christians tend to place scripture – especially well-known passages such as these Beatitudes – within the context of their own personal lives and relationship with God. While this is not totally wrong, it is also not totally right either. We each have a personal relationship with God but, throughout scripture, God makes it clear to us that personal relationship is not the endgame. Our relationship with God is intended to be within the context of everyone else and all of creation around us. We see today, in Matthew’s Gospel story, Jesus has the disciples sitting near him, listening to his teaching, But, this is done against the backdrop of the large crowds. The people who long for what Jesus is offering are the eager listeners in the background. It is the same for us. We gather to listen to Jesus, to be in his presence, but this is always done against the backdrop of the hundreds of people outside this gathering who long for what Jesus is offering. What we experience together is not ours alone. Jesus speaks through us, his disciples sitting near to him, he speaks through us to the crowd beyond. This reality must never slip from our minds. We gather to be sent. Just as the original disciples were so long ago, so now are we.

Knowing that these blessings are not ours alone, let's hear Jesus speak them again.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit." These are the people crushed by ongoing lack of basic needs and by the injustices built into our society. These are the ones pushed aside and left behind. It is not just the homeless on the street or the people lined up at the food bank. There are many who experience the cold shoulder of society: from the 90 year-old man in the nursing home never getting any visitors to the young gay man who takes his own life because he is tired of being shunned and fearful of getting beaten on his way home from school. These are adored by God.

"Blessed are those who mourn." We all experience death in our lives and grief is difficult. We do not, thankfully know the constancy of death that others know: the reality of needing to have 10 children so that one or two will survive into adulthood; the reality of war killing hundreds; genocide killing thousands; disease eradicating entire populations. The COVID pandemic brought us closer to understanding the inevitability and constant presence of death that others know all the time. Images from Ukraine drive home the horrors of war. Those who mourn are not just those experiencing the atrocities but also those who mourn that the atrocities are taking place at all. These are adored by God.

"Blessed are the meek." Jesus is referring to those who suffer at the hands of the wicked who seem only to prosper. The meek are also those who strive, in nonviolent ways, to make things right. It is hard to take when someone achieves success through deception or cutthroat tactics on the backs of many unacknowledged workers. Jesus was speaking to those toiling daily to put money

in the pockets of the already wealthy and powerful. Our society still operates this way. By 9:43am on Tuesday, January 3, 2023 – the first day of work of the new year for most people – Canada’s top CEO’s had already earned the average worker’s salary for this entire year...By 9:43am on the first working day of the year. Many people in Canada, rich though we are in the eyes of most of the world, do not earn enough on which to live, needing to make the choice between paying the heating bill or putting food on the table. These are adored by God.

Here Jesus changes gears. He has been speaking about the injustices and hardships inflicted on those who have been rendered mostly powerless and ineffective against the larger systemic workings of society. He has assured them of God’s love and that God’s rule will make right the injustices they currently are living. Now he speaks of what people can do and be in spite of the odds against them.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” We learned not too long ago that, although we think of righteousness as being moral and ethical, it is more than that. Righteousness means being in right relationship with God and others. This relationship leads to moral and ethical living – and it means more than being a nice person or a good person. Jesus is talking about those who are also working to right the wrongs of systemic injustice and inequality, those striving to fix the brokenness of the unjust distribution keeping people on the margins of subsistence, those rescuing the “other” from the cold shoulder of society. These are adored by God.

“Blessed are the merciful.” These are the people sharing their resources, caring for the outcast. In Jesus’ time, Rome was not known for mercy. It was, in essence,

a large business thriving on the rules that benefited the wealthy and powerful and plowing under those who were not. Our equivalence – although it does not put us in the oppressive state of the impoverished – our equivalence would be something like dealing with large corporations such as banks or insurance companies or Bell Canada. Perhaps, after many years of being a loyal customer you are suddenly treated in a way that feels unfair and disrespectful to the many years and dollars you have given to them and you are told, “Well, those are the rules. We are following the rules.” Being helpless is difficult. With the power we have, we are to be merciful to those with less power. These are adored by God.

“Blessed are the pure in heart.” These are the people who follow God’s will in their thinking and in their doing. Unlike the big corporations we just talked about, these are the people who act justly and mercifully – not using God’s laws to enable unfair treatment of others. Those who are committed to God, through and through, these are adored by God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers.” The peace of Rome was a false peace enforced through coercion and the threat of violence. Many wars and conflicts are the result of powerful, privileged people who want to impose their version of peace, their vision of rightness onto others. The peacemakers are the people who understand that life in God’s kingdom is a choice, it is completely voluntary and cannot be imposed on anyone, and they long for people to make that choice. These are adored by God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” Jesus knows that, when people do all of these things to work with God to mend the brokenness of the world, they will meet with backlash. Life will not be all sunshine

and roses as we live into the perfection of God's kingdom. But, throughout these Beatitudes, Jesus has strewn the hope of what we know is coming: We will be in God's perfect kingdom on earth, seeing and knowing God as God's children, receiving God's mercy, being filled with all we need, comforted and content.

We are fortunate – no one in Canada is killed simply for saying they follow Christ. But, make no mistake, being a disciple of Christ does run counter to the values of society. “When we live a life for justice for the oppressed and marginalized, when we extend mercy to the outcast, when we live the values outlined in the beatitudes, the rulers of this world will resist us” (Jillian Engelhardt, workingpreacher.org). Barbara Brown Taylor tells us that people have always done what they wanted with the Beatitudes. “Some have ignored them, some have admired them and walked away, some have used them as a yardstick to measure their own blessedness, and some have used them to declare revolution.” Living the way of the beatitudes turns our world upside-down. They are a challenge to the privileged of the first-world: where is your hunger and thirst? Where is your spiritual poverty? Where is your commitment, through and through, to God's mercy, God's peace? Right now, these same beatitudes are being heard around the world – “in a cinder block church in Kenya, where people sit cross-legged on a packed dirt floor while carpenter bees fly in and out the open window; in a shack on stilts in the wetlands of El Salvador, where the majority of those present must listen hard because they cannot read”; in a Salvation Army chapel in Canada where the listeners have no home to return to once the service is over. For these people the words offer comfort and hope that the world does not: “Shh, they say [to their little ones], dry your tears...The whole earth belongs

to you, though someone else still holds the keys.” (quotations from B.B. Taylor’s *Gospel Medicine*, p.147, 148).

Whether in challenge or in comfort, we hear these words of Jesus against the backdrop of hundreds of people beyond us – those who need us to live the way of the beatitudes and who will also help us in that constant struggle. Last week, Jesus said to us, “Follow me.” Today we hear him tell us how to do that.

John Kirvan, in his book called, *God Hunger*, explains our call. He writes: The invitation to ‘come follow me’ may always be the same but it is never delivered twice in the same way, certainly never in the same context. For no two people can hear it in the same way, no two people will respond in the same way...the time in which we live and the personal history we carry with us make their own special demands and offer their own special opportunities. No one has ever before heard the invitation in exactly the same way it has come o us. Our moment is unique” (p.188). Each moment is unique. What we do this year as the body of Christ – feeding the hungry, reaching out to those in need – will change as our moment changes. Through these changes, let us always walk the way of the blessings – adoring God, being adored by God, and helping others adored by God – for we never walk alone.