

Matthew 5:1-12

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then 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. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon

As we focus in on the Sermon on the Mount, one of Jesus' first significant teachings, it's helpful to know that he doesn't just show up and start talking. He's been doing the work of healing, and restoring people to community for awhile now. Which is why the crowds are following him, and why they stick around when he starts talking.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gathered this crowd on a mountain somewhere in the region of Galilee. If you've been to the Holy Land, you know that the landscape is less like the forests and snow capped peaks of the Cascades or Rocky Mountains in the U...but instead they're more like the hills, our mountains, in Southern California. The mountains aren't huge, but when you're on the top, you can see for a long way. Wherever these Jesus following folks were gathered, they likely had a panoramic view. They could see farmers gathering olives, and the Roman occupation building more outposts. There were likely shepherds in close proximity, and women

gathering water. This sermon wasn't preached in isolation, or after retreating for the day, but instead in conversation with the whole of life in first century Palestine.

One more thing to note, before we listen again with fresh ears, is that the word for blessed, *ashray*, isn't a great translation. A better one would be *enviable*, or someone or something to look up to.

Listen again, now, with this definition in mind, alongside the panorama of colonial oppression, vast inequity, and the beauty and banality of first century Palestinians going about their day...

"Look up to the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...and also those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 "Enviably are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 "Enviably are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7 "Look up to the merciful in a world hard wired for retribution, for they will receive mercy....and on and on he goes...

There is a whole list of qualities in this passage that culture, then and now, certainly tells us are markers of weakness, even foolishness. And it's into those places that Christ speaks a word first of love and tenderness and blessing. It is from that place that we're called out...

As campus pastor, I have the remarkable privilege of walking with young adults in this intense time of their lives, as they explore both their identity and their call. I've been particularly challenged and inspired, blessed, even, by a couple of our students who identify as neuro-diverse, these are students who are on the spectrum, who carry with them a diagnosis of autism, or aspergers, or other ways of learning or being in the world that are atypical.

Families and individuals certainly have different ways of understanding what it means to thrive in our world, and we're all doing the best we can in parenting and life. And, as these young adults are growing up, they are leading an emerging movement to learn embrace those parts of themselves that they were taught to ignore, or suppress simply to fit in. And they are discovering who they are once they stop wearing the mask they were taught they had to wear to be accepted. As I was talking with and learning about this journey from one of our students, and how unmoored she feels at times, she told me how important it has been for her to be on this journey as a person of faith, grounded in her first belovedness.

Blessed are you who have unconventional ways of calming yourself and releasing your energy, for you teach us to not bottle all those feelings up inside. Blessed are you who can focus in on one thing, for you will change the world. Blessed are you who are socially awkward, for you make it okay for us all to be ourselves. Blessed are you...

And also, blessed are you, and you, and you...

You that are hungry, and you that had to sit alone at lunch, you that are carrying a wicked diagnosis, you that just failed a test, and you that are paralyzed by the stories of suffering in the news. You that are lonely, you that are afraid, you that doubt, you that are depressed. You are blessed.

Some of us are told we're broken when we're actually not. Some of us actually carry deep brokenness, and are in need of healing. Hear this good news, friends in Christ, no matter the hurt, Jesus meets you there. Jesus calls you blessed. I wonder, where are those places, deep down inside, that the world tells you to be ashamed of? What have you been told to hide, or change? And what would it feel like to hear that even those parts of you are touched by Christ, transformed by Christ, loved by Christ?

Because they are. You are. You are beloved beyond measure, before or beyond any labels of strength or weakness. And it is from that place that you are called, that we are called, to be bearers of the good news. It is from that place that we are called into the transformative work of the gospel.

Do any of you watch Queer Eye on Netflix? I'm a super fan, and am moved to tears at almost every episode. The premise of the show is essentially a makeover show, but this group of five queer men, The Fab 5, has transformed what that means. They come from diverse backgrounds, and each have specialties that they lead with - in fashion, and home design, and hair and makeup, cooking, but my favorite is Karamo, the psychologist. The amazing thing about this show, and the thing that brings me to my knees is that they don't radically change people, but instead listen to the people around the person, and encourage vulnerability in the person themselves. Together the Fab Five helps that person discover what is beautiful about themselves, to do the work of healing if it needs to be done, and show them how to live in the world from that place.

But here's the kicker, if you watch the show long enough, you realize that the joy and playfulness and compassion that is a marker of this particular group of men, is born of a good deal of suffering, and loss, and healing. But somehow, somewhere, they were able to hear a word of blessing, and they are able to live from that space, now. Though they have varying religious identities, they have internalized a sense of belovedness, and live and love from that place.

Oh that the church could do the same. What might the world be like if we could trust that we are made good, perhaps in need of healing, and still very, very good. What might the world be like if we danced out into the world from that place, with joy and compassion? How might we talk to our politically diverse families, or legislate, or drive to work differently if we could see the goodness, the blessedness, at the heart of every person?

Here's the thing – though there is deep assuredness about our belovedness in the eyes of Christ, the beatitudes are never just about an individual blessing. Our walk with Christ is never only about our first belovedness, but instead is a grounding for a call to be co-creators with God, healing and restoring and renewing God's good creation. So, as you go out from this place, and walk from a place of freedom and belovedness, continuing to do the good work to which you have been called, imperfectly and earnestly, and with compassion and great joy.

May it be so. Amen.