

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
4th Sunday after the Epiphany/Year A
January 29, 2017
Text: Matthew 5:1-12

“Blessed”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.”

We are now in the 5th chapter of Matthew's gospel on this 4th Sunday after the Epiphany. And as the season of Epiphany helps to illuminate or show Jesus as God-made man come into the world, Matthew's gospel continues to give us insight into who Jesus was as he embarked on his mission in the world.

Perhaps it is important to note a few attributes of Matthew's gospel. Matthew's gospel was much loved by the early Church and it is believed to have been written for a Jewish audience. Therefore, one of the great objectives of this gospel according to William Barclay, a noted scholar and theologian, is to demonstrate to the Jewish community that all the prophecies found in the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus and to convince them that Jesus was indeed, the long awaited Messiah. There was no other to come. And speaking of coming, Jesus has the most to say about his second coming in Matthew more than in any other gospel. There are other attributes in this gospel but Barclay then goes on to say that the greatest characteristic of Matthew's gospel is that it is the *premier teaching* gospel. What is highlighted in this gospel is not always what Jesus *does* but what he *says*. Throughout this gospel Jesus says a lot.

Our passage is contained in what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount spans three chapters in Matthew's gospel. The beginning of the Sermon on the Mount is perhaps among the most known and beloved sayings of Jesus in all the gospels. His opening words of blessing rank up there with other verses and passages that most of us can more readily recall from scripture (at least in part) or find in many Christian bookstores on notecards, wall hangings, and plaques. We've even seen it imprinted on a throw rug or two!

Jesus has gone up the mountainside with his newly called disciples and the crowds that followed him. He sat down and began to teach. As Jesus began to speak his words certainly must have seemed odd to them.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Who in their right mind finds an emptiness in the pit of their stomach, their soul, pleasurable? When it takes every ounce of energy to put one foot in front of the other?

“Blessed are those who mourn.” How can anyone find joy in the death of someone we loved or in the sudden loss of a friend? When we mourn the loss of a job or our own self-worth?

“Blessed are the meek.” Seriously, meek sometimes equals weak, fearful, and timid-the kind of folks that get pushed around on playgrounds and attacked on social media these days.

Blessed are the hungry, the thirsty, the persecuted, and the reviled? Really, Jesus! What is there to be so happy about when you are hungering for something beyond you? When you are being beaten up physically, emotionally, spiritually when all you wanted to do was to stand up to the truth, come to someone’s rescue even your own, when your reputation is being slung in the mud? *“Rejoice and be glad?”* Where is the joy, the happiness, the blessing in any of that?

Those who sat on the mountainside that day must have been puzzled by what Jesus was saying. But Jesus knew what he was doing. Jesus had come to turn everything they knew upside down. By offering them God’s blessings in the context of their situations, God and God’s kingdom had become both clearer and nearer and was indeed in their midst.

You and I, indeed, most Christians grew up hearing the words of the Beatitudes. We listen to their poetic beauty and at the same time we wonder how anyone can live them in a world such as ours. Success in our day does not equate with being poor or hungry or meek in any form or fashion. People who stick out their necks for what is right and those who speak out for the sake of peace and fairness and justice are often targeted as troublemakers or people who need to be shut up and shut down. No, we have a culture that teaches that we must be on top of our A-game and earn our award points no matter the cost. That there is nothing better for folks who seem to exist on the bottom rung with nothing to show for themselves.

But Jesus says to us as he said to the crowds, ‘Think again. This is how things go in God’s kingdom.’

Blessed are the poor in spirit. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn. For they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek. For they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. For they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful. For they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart. For they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers. For they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
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.

In her sermon, “Blessed are the Upside Down”, Barbara Brown Taylor has this to say:

Most of us do not know what to do with the Beatitudes. Some of us have heard them for so long that they have lost their shock value for us. They just sound sort of sweet and familiar to us—a Christmas poem—something to needlepoint and hang over the piano. Others of us hear them like new commandments and worry that we are not meek enough, pure enough, persecuted enough. But please note that there are no “shoulds” or “oughts” here, no “shalts” or “shalt nots.” The language of the Beatitudes is not transactional language—do this and you will receive this; do that and you will receive that. It is descriptive language—this is who these people are now, and this is what the future holds for them. It is not the language of law but of gospel, the language of hope and promise that the way things are now is not the way they will always be, and that those who find themselves at the back of the bus now will be sitting in first class before the trip is through.”*

We need to hear this now more than ever before and so does the rest of the world so that collectively we might understand what being blessed truly means. Not in human terms but in God’s—God who comes near to us and is with us amidst all our messiness and brokenness and assures us that no matter our circumstances, we are his and we are blessed *now, right now*, and in life everlasting. Amen!

* Taken from the sermon, “Blessed are the Upside Down”, in Barbara Brown Taylor’s book, Gospel Medicine, page 147.