

San Lorenzo Community Church

United Church of Christ

Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, January 29, 2017

Hear now a reading from the Gospel of Matthew 5:1-12.

5 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them.

He said:

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 be shown 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 because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.

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One Sunday as they drove home from church, a little girl turned to her mother and said, "Mommy, there's something about the preacher's message this morning that I don't understand."

The mother said, "Oh? What is it?"

The little girl replied, "Well, she said that God is bigger than we are. She said God is so big that God can hold the whole world in Her hands. Is that true?"

The mother replied, "Yes, that's true, honey."

"But Mommy, she also said that God comes to live inside of us when we believe in Jesus. Is that true, too?"

Again, the mother assured the little girl that what the pastor had said was true. With a puzzled look on her face the little girl then asked, "If God is bigger than us and God lives in us, wouldn't God show through?"

That is what the beatitudes are about - God showing through.

The comedy troupe, Monty Python, made a movie back in the 1980s called, "The Life of Brian." Do you remember it? It tells the story of a man who was born on Christmas Day in the stable next door to Jesus. His path is one of mistaken identity and he becomes known as Brian of Nazareth. The movie is very funny and a bit sacrilegious; and, being that it's a British film, it can get a bit bawdy at times. The sayings of Jesus are misinterpreted and the sayings of Brian are gobbly-gook mistaken for philosophy.

In one scene, a crowd has gathered around Jesus, who is speaking and teaching. This is the Sermon on the Mount. At the back of the crowd are two people who are trying to get closer, to hear what is being said. The crowd is chattering to one another, creating a din of noise in the background. One of them says to the other:

"Hey, go have your conversation somewhere else. I can't hear anything."

And another person says, "Can you please be quiet. I'm trying to listen."

"What did he say? Did you hear that?"

"No, I missed it."

"I think he said blessed are the cheesemakers."

"What's so special about cheesemakers?"

"Well, obviously that's not meant literally. It refers to any manufacturing of dairy products."

"See. If you hadn't been going on, we've have heard that. That could be important to know."

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The beatitudes are the language of blessing. Blessed are. Mark Twain once said that the sections of the New Testament giving him the most trouble were not those he couldn't understand but rather the sections he could. Yes, it is passages like this – the beatitudes – that seem to give us the most difficulty because they are so plain, so straight forward.

These are lofty ideals; some would say moral imperatives. The only problem with this view is we start to walk down the road that says we must become poor in spirit, we must become meek, and we must become persecuted in order to receive the blessing of the kingdom of heaven.

But I think this is not how it goes. I don't believe that for a minute. We have for so very long looked at the beatitudes as if they were an instruction manual – if you do this, then this will happen. If you put yourself in a position to be persecuted, then God will respond like this. But no.

If the blessings of God were only for those who have earned it, then the Sermon on the Mount would have started out with Jesus saying: "If you have done all of these things, then God will bless you." In fact, the radical, upside down, in-your-face reality is that God's blessing comes first – there is nothing you can do, nothing you can say, nothing you can believe that will "earn" you God's blessings.

You do not have to become a cheesemaker in order to receive God's blessing. You don't have to become poor to receive blessing. You don't have to become persecuted to receiving blessing. In fact, Jesus is telling us that right now, where you, with whatever history you bring with you, you are blessed – and God is blessing all of the outcast, too; the marginalized, the immigrant, the refugee, the disabled, the poor, the oppressed. All of God's people are blessed.

We often think we deserve God's blessings because we are good people, we try hard, we listen carefully, we think about things and we sometimes even act in generous ways, sometimes we even vote as part of our civic duty. Yes, like the disciples, we are already following Jesus. So what does Jesus say, the first things out of his mouth? Jesus says oh, guess what? God's blessing sets the stage for us. God's blessings are not earned, they are given.

Our motivation to help others, love others, bring peace among neighbors and nations is not so that we might get a reward at the end of our life as we enter heaven's gate. No, no, no. Our motivation, and the only motivation that will sustain us through all of the years of this life, our motivation is that "because of" God's blessings, we respond to others. This is God shining through.

There is the story about the youngest son in a family who was asked to say the blessing at breakfast one morning. With his head bowed and his eyes tightly shut, he prayed in a clear, loud voice: "We thank Thee, God, for this beautiful day and for our food. Amen."

Everyone at the table glared at him. The day was not beautiful. It was a miserable day - cold, damp, and dark. His father said sternly, "You must never pray insincerely like that."

An older brother muttered, "What a jerk! Trying to be smart."

And his mother asked, "What do you mean, 'A beautiful day!'?"

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As the youngster reached for the strawberry jam, he simply said, "You can't judge a day by its weather."

I like that. "You can't judge a day by its weather." God has blessed this day – no matter the weather.

God has blessed even those whom you don't believe deserve it – blessings to poor people, blessings to mean people, blessings to manipulative, angry and outcast people. There are no limits, because there is no litmus test, no multiple-choice exam, no doctoral thesis to enumerate all of the reasons you have earned God's blessing.

Glennon Doyle Melton writes a popular blog called Momastery. She posted some pictures of her 1980's kitchen, laminate cabinets, mismatched appliances, and clutter on every possible surface and received lots and lots, hundreds and hundreds of responses offering ideas for how should could update, upgrade, and remodel the kitchen. She writes:

"As I laid down to sleep [that night], I remembered this passage from Henry David Thoreau: "I say beware of all enterprises that require new clothes and not a new wearer of the clothes."

She says, "Walden reminds me that when I feel lacking, I don't need new things, I need new eyes with which to see the things I already have. So when I woke up this morning, I walked into my kitchen wearing fresh spectacles. [That's the combination of spectacles and perspective – we call them "perspectacles.] Here's what she saw.

"You guys. I have a refrigerator. This thing magically makes food cold. I'm pretty sure in the olden days, frontierswomen had to drink warm Diet Coke. Sweet Jesus. Thank you, precious kitchen.

Inside my refrigerator is food. Healthy food that so many parents would give anything to be able to feed their children. Almost 16,000 mama's babies die every day from malnutrition. Not mine. When this food runs out, I'll just jump in my car to get more. It's ludicrous, really. It's like my family hits the lottery every freaking morning.

[Nearby is] this crazy thing [called] a water faucet. I pull this lever and clean water pours out every time, day or night. 780 million people worldwide (one in nine) lack access to clean water. Mamas everywhere spend their entire day walking miles to and from wells just for a single bucket of this -- and I have it right here at my fingertips. I'm almost embarrassed to say that we also have one of these in each of our two bathrooms, and one in the front yard with which to wash our feet. We use clean drinking water to wash our feet. Holy bounty.

[And then there is] This ... magical box in which I put uncooked stuff, push some buttons, and then a minute later, pull out cooked stuff. It is like the Jetsons up in here.

[Look at this floor] - This is our kitchen floor. It's not fancy, but it's perfect for our most important kitchen activity: Dancing. When [my daughter] Chase was three, a librarian asked

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a roomful of kids, "What do we do in the kitchen?" Everyone else called out "cook" or "eat!" But Chase yelled "DANCE!"

[And the coffee pot], I can't even talk about this thing. Actually, let's take a moment of reverent silence because this machine is the reason all my people are still alive. It turns magical beans into a life-saving nectar of the gods. Every morning. On a timer.

And look you guys: LOOK. This is the kitchen corner where I keep all my kids' school stuff. My kids go to a FREE school with brilliant teachers and a loving administration and they're safe there. The school sends flyers home about programs and classes and clubs to make my kids' hearts bigger and softer and their brains sharper and their bodies healthier. This corner reminds me every day that my kids have at their fingertips what so many around the world are giving their lives for: quality education. When I wear my perspectacles I can't look at this corner [of my kitchen] without a heart explosion."

You get it. God is shining through.

The beatitudes are not setting up the exclusive set of conditions in which God will offer blessing. Instead, the beatitudes are the reminder that always and everywhere God is at work offering blessing and grace. Even and especially in the unexpected places.

The Gospel – and this part of the Gospel -- is a word of protest. The Beatitudes are blessings and a call to action.

The Beatitudes are a call to action to be church, a call to action to make Jesus present and visible and manifest when the world tries desperately to silence those who speak the truth.

Martin Luther King Jr., wrote from the jail in Birmingham, Alabama:

"There was a time when the church was very powerful -- in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days, the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society... If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning..." (Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail").

The Beatitudes are a call to action for the sake of creating the world God imagines. The Beatitudes are a change of perspective where we see what we truly have that is precious and dear. The Beatitudes are a promise that what we do and what we say and what we believe matters.

For those of us who follow Jesus, we follow him to the mountaintop to hear the Sermon on the Mount and then we follow him down into the valley to meet the challenge of human needs and human rights and human fullness and dignity.

God's blessings matter. And they are upon us now. Amen.