

BLESSINGS

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, February 2, 2020

Scripture: [Matthew 5:1–12](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

When you hang out with church folks and preachers, you learn another set of manners. One is, when you have been invited to lead some part of a service other than the sermon, you *must*, I repeat *must* resist the temptation to turn whatever you're doing into its own sermon. I'm going to try and avoid that temptation today, but also pray for your grace... you see the preacher today, and for this month, is Jesus.

Today we start a three week walk through Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. So hear the preacher, Jesus, (and I will probably have something to say, too) as he begins his sermon... offering blessings, or, as we call this section of the sermon now, "The Beatitudes."

SERMON

"Bless" is a word that does a lot in our culture. In a lot of social media, it means "beautiful vacation" or "time with kids." We are still real worried about your soul when you sneeze... though I'm noticing that's going out of favor a little. If you are from the south of our country, you realize this is a world that has endless permutations, only about 60 percent of which are positive. If you're from the north, I invite to recalibrate yourself and think back on any blessings you may have received from southern relatives, and consider if you'd like to keep them. The blessing, not the relatives.

What do *you* bless? What have you had blessed? What blessings do you seek?

I've blessed plenty of people in my life. That's always powerful. I've prayed for them in times of new jobs, marriages, and so blessed lots of rings... I've blessed a moving truck and the ones driving it. I've blessed babies just newly born, and I've blessed people as they breathed their last breath... and both still make me cry and burst with love.

I have obviously blessed a whole mess of food. I have blessed pets (alive and dead), houses, cars... I've blessed lots of first pay-checks at a new job. I've blessed water, and wine, sherry, and grape juice... and found people found joy in all of them... once a very fine scotch... that was a less liturgical setting. Candle-sticks, a table, guitars... the list goes on. We are hungry for blessings, it seems.

Mostly I think people hope for good fortune with all these blessings, or maybe just a little offering of love, of connection. Maybe a moment to pause and recognize the blessing we are receiving by this moment, or that food, or the chance to know blessings at a table, or with another. But the word and the activity obviously cover a lot.

Jesus tells us about what God blesses today, and what that means... as he begins this most incredible sermon. One that is challenging... Kurt Vonnegut once bemoaned the fact that there were some who were more than happy to carve the Ten Commandments into public buildings, but very few who would place these blessings there. He imagined a world in which the Pentagon was inscribed with the words "Blessed are the peacemakers," and courtrooms with "Blessed are the merciful." Then he had a good laugh. ^[1]

We translate Jesus's meaning here as blessed... some of you may have heard translations that say "happy", but it is something more than either of these... the blessing that is offered is something like "satisfied" or "full", or honored. I have sometimes said, "whole."

And that's the radical, ironic, kind of funny, and powerful heart of Jesus here:

"Whole will be the people who are poor in spirit."

"Whole will be the mourners."

"Whole will be the meek."

"...the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

"...the merciful"

The ones who are whole are the ones who know the lack, who hunger, who are not content. Maybe most of all because their hunger points them to what could be.

If you have never been hungry, can you know the worth of food?

If we have not mourned, we may not know the true value of life.

If we have not grieved injustice, how will we treasure righteousness?

Put another way, the call is to know and name our own need, and find God in the mirror image that meets us in the lives of others. It is to let our own need for comfort, for a home on the earth, for fullness of justice, open us up to compassion, and thus to the spread of Jesus's teaching, and God's realm.

It has been a hard week for wholeness as an idea. In Washington, leaders on both sides of the aisle found ways to decry our divisions, and bemoan the disfunction of our national governance, while somehow also declaring themselves unable to do anything about it. Rather than hungering for righteousness, there is a question if we are hungry for it, or would even recognize it.

The blessing, the wholeness, held out by Jesus from the mountaintop is this: to reach for what is not yet, but we believe with full hearts with God *will be*. That we are never to cease from calling out for the justice, the mercy, the peace we know we lack... but has been offered to us in the wholeness of God, and neighbor, and all creation.

Jesus tells us of all sorts of persecutions that we may, or will, know if we follow in this path, but he also promises that it is the way of prophets, and of the Holy Spirit, and of a coming reign of God that will dissolve all the comfortable empires of his day and ours... dissolve whatever contentment we might have in ourselves, but fail to share with others. These blessings, and this whole sermon on the mount will ask us as hearers of the Word, both scripture and Christ: "Who are we?" Will we be a community, and individuals, who are hungry righteousness, who seek peace, who reach for mercy? There is blessing and wholeness here, will we reach for it?

The hymn writer, Shirley Erena Murray died last Saturday. Born in New Zealand in 1931 she was sort of Metho-Preby-everything, but above all, committed—hungry—to find new and alive words for Christ's call. Both of our hymns today are hers. She fought apartheid and the spread of nuclear weapons, she wrote hymns, hymns, and more hymns. Singing of the wholeness and blessing we might hope for today, in 2009 she wrote:

*"Where does compassion start?
How does compassion grow?
Her seed is at the heart
of every faith we know:
compassion honours others' place
dethroning self with willing grace...*

*"Dynamic is the power
that heals restores and gives,
connecting at the core
with everyone who lives,
transcending culture, colour, race,
compassion builds the house of peace."^[1]*

Of all the blessings we seek, may we find this one: of a deep and abiding hunger to grow in the compassion of God which has been offered to us, if we will but share it with a hungry world for the building up of God's coming house of peace. Amen.

1. Murray, Shirley Erena. *Where Does Compassion Start*. 2009 ↩