

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

20th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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Text: Matthew 5:1-12

Title: “Who are you? Embodying Beatitude Living”

I found my eyes welling up with tears on Wednesday when once again a young teenager—this time in Townville, SC—was apparently so distraught with his life that he took his father’s life and then attempted to take others’ too. I felt for the injured people, felt for the parents waiting to pick up their kids, felt for the 14 year old with a gun who acted out in the most troubling way. Lynn and I looked at one another and said, “Oh, no, not another one!”

Beyond all of that, what really drove me to the depths was what 6-year old little girl heard him say: “I hate my life.” And then the shooting started.

Sometimes I wonder if I’m preaching the same sermon over and over again, which, of course, is somewhat true. The world we live in is full of brokenness. Evidence is abundant. We don’t have to look very hard to find it. Yet, there is truth that is deeper than the brokenness and that is, I hope, the primary reason you and I are here in worship: in the midst of the brokenness we know is all around, where do we find hope? Where can we experience healing and grace and mercy and justice and life that really is life as God intends? What is our answer in a world in which a 14 year old is so broken he can’t experience God’s love for him in ways that keeps him whole?

The answer to this can be found in the home of Miles Pike. Anyone who has visited Miles is probably aware of the afghan that his late wife, Irene, crocheted. Irene was a talented lady and she spent hours and hours of labor on this afghan that lays across one of Mile’s sofas in the living room. I don’t have a clue how she did it because I don’t crochet and never have but Irene took the time to write using loops of yarn—I assume—and created this fabric that contains the Beatitudes.

These teachings come from “The Gospel According to Matthew”, the only Gospel writing that contains them. They are spoken by Jesus as he delivers his Sermon on the Mount, teaching his disciples and others what the good news of the kingdom of heaven sounds like, looks like acts like.

(Early service)

The words are posted around the room and now on the monitors:

5 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.

(Later service)

We sang a paraphrase of them a few minutes ago.

These descriptions of behavior --of reacting to life--collide with the way things seem. In a world of brokenness where 14 year olds can be heard saying they hate their lives, these words of blessedness may ring hollow. In this culture of ours that is grounded in competition and fear, a person who is poor in spirit or peaceful or merciful or meek isn't likely to get very far. One scholar I read wondered, “Who can survive in attempting to live into the spirit of the Beatitudes?” (p. 308, Feasting on the Word, v.1). Some say that in offering the beatitudes, Jesus was turning the world's values upside down. These words are a description of the way things are in God's kingdom, God's realm. The beatitudes describe a way of being in the world that lead us to particular practices, practices that are meant for anyone seeking to follow in the ways of Jesus, anyone who seeks the blessings—the joy and happiness—of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

I appreciate what on scholar, Charles Cook, points out in suggesting that there are three principles for living into the spirit of the beatitudes: **simplicity, hopefulness & compassion.**

To experience the beatitudes in **simplicity** has little to do with sophistication. What I mean is that when we hear someone saying I'm simplifying my life. Often it has to do with prioritizing what is important in order to give more time or focus to the core values a person has

in his or her life. It might mean selling some things in order to let go of the clutter and stress that more stuff in our lives can bring. Simplicity when it comes to the beatitudes is about hearing these descriptions as being spoken to us. But more than that to hear them without imposing our own prejudices, being intentional about clearing away what we want them to mean in order to perhaps avoid the challenge they pose in the living of our own lives.

This last week in my devotional time, a prayer by John Baillie, was offered as one of the readings for reflection. In Baillie's prayer he asks in God's presence questions of self-examination. Hearing Jesus describe the blessedness experienced in being merciful and in being a peacemaker, I listened to Baillie's questions before God:

*Have I made more excuses for myself than I have been willing to make for others?
Have I, in my own home, been a peace-maker or have I stirred up strife?
Have I, while professing noble sentiments for great causes and distant objects, failed even in common charity and courtesy towards those nearest to me?
Give me grace to answer honestly, O God.*

Is it possible that these teachings of Jesus are meant to lead us to ask these kinds of questions about ourselves? Have we experienced the blessings that being merciful brings? Do we know the gift of being poor in spirit or mourning? Do we know the value of being meek or humble? Have we experienced the deep happiness that having a hunger and thirst for righteousness can bring? Have we experienced the presence and power of God in the midst of being merciful, pure in heart, or a peacemaker? A simple approach to the beatitudes is to hear them as if we were in the crowd on that hill far away on the Galilean hillside and these words were spoken directly to us: "You are blessed in this life whenever you demonstrate humility, bring a peaceful presence, open your heart to others, and show mercy on those who cry for it" (ibid., p.310).

A second principle in living into the spirit of the beatitudes is **hopefulness**. The opposite way of living, of course, is hopelessness, the notion nothing can or will ever change for the better, that there is no use trying because we can't change and neither will others. This kind of hopelessness stands in direct contrast to the message of Jesus. The Apostle Paul said it well when he wrote to the congregation in Rome:

*For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.
(Romans 8:24-25)*

Even when the outward signs in the world indicate otherwise, Jesus offers words of hope. I'm thinking again of the 14 year old and wondering how many of you reacted with disbelief or tears or wishing such things would not be happening. We hope for something more from life and for the 14 year old and the victims and their families. We mourn when these things happen. The beatitude describing those who mourn being blessed isn't just about those who've lost loved ones, but rather about those who feel the pain of others and themselves when this kind of brokenness happens in the world. Those who recognize that the present condition is far from

what God intends are the mourners. And there is blessing in such mourning because beneath the mourning is the hope that things can be, should be, otherwise, that God does not want this kind of violence or injustice or exploitation of others to happen. Imagine a world in which no one cared if random violence occurred. Imagine if no one cared about more powerful people exploiting the powerless. No one cared if little children were victimized. Imagine. What a dark, lifeless place it would be.

But Jesus offers hope and points out that mourning the brokenness is a blessing because it is a sign of hope, a recognition that this is not the way in God's kingdom, God's realm. This mourning is bound up in God's love which as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, Greece:

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
(1 Corinthians 13:7)

A third and final principle of living into the spirit of the beatitudes is **compassion**. By definition compassion is

...a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.

Compassion is embodied in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, who stopped to give aid to a stranger beaten up and left for dead in a ditch. His mourning for the man's brokenness led him to identify with the victim and do something to alleviate his suffering. After all, it could have been him in that ditch and he would have been grateful for the care of another human being.

Compassion has to do with recognizing what one of my favorite writers on the spiritual life wrote. Henri Nouwen wrote that compassion "...grows with the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts through all walls which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end."

The beatitudes describe not only the characteristics of a person—being poor in spirit, being meek or humble, being pure in heart. They also have to do with relationships with others: having a passion for justice, being merciful to others, seeking to make peace with others, relating to those who oppose one's efforts to live in the spirit of the beatitudes. On this World Communion Sunday recognizing that we share our neighbor's humanity and the beatitude call to live in ways that Jesus describes, brings blessings all its own.

Simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion: three approaches to the beatitudes that can lead us to embodying them.

In closing, let me ask all of us as you look around the room at the beatitudes posted on the walls: have you experienced them in your own life? Have you experienced them in the life of this congregation? Have you known the blessing of being merciful and receiving mercy? Have you experienced the presence and power of God's Spirit by keeping your heart pure? Have you found something of God's presence in making peace at home, at work, in your family, at the church? Have you seen God in those who embody this ways of being in the world? Are there changes in your own life you might make in order to receive the gift of embodying the beatitudes?

However we choose to respond to these teachings, Jesus offers hope, profound hope in the midst of the brokenness of the world. We can see it all the time in those who live into the spirit of the beatitudes. May we be so blessed by living into these gifts.