



Sermon, January 13, 2019
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Okay, Jesus, Now What?
The Beatitudes Part 1: "Oh, to Be Happy!"

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12 NRSV:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'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, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Last week we celebrated Epiphany, which observes the journey of the magi, the wise men, to visit the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem. I suggested that we consider the journey of the magi to be also our journey, a journey into what Jesus called "life in abundance." It is a journey to realm of a higher consciousness, a more expanded understanding of the universe and of what it means to be human. Because, as St. Irenaeus understood, the glory of God is a fully alive human being, it is also a journey of becoming fully human, filled with the Divine Life within us. Jesus called this the Kingdom of heaven, or as some like to phrase it, the "kin-dom" of heaven, or I like to call it the realm of heaven. Paul calls it having the mind of Christ.

Getting Dessert: "Eat your vegetables and all your dinner or no dessert."
How many of you were raised with a similar dinner code?

Family of William Stafford, as remembered by son Kim, had an interesting weekly practice. Actually, it was two practices. One day a

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week, they got dessert first. Then one day they ate only rice or something like that to experience what many poor people in the world have. A nice and theologically appropriate balance: grace and responsibility.

What if you walked into a class and the first thing the teacher said was, "you have an "A" for the semester?" We are used to get our rewards after we do something right, or what is expected of us. Achieve first, reward last. Work first, get paid later.

That is what is so radically outlandish about the idea of getting dessert first, isn't it? It goes against the usual expectations. That is why it is such a great example of grace. Grace is the gift of God that comes our way regardless of what we actually deserve. It's that part of God's great love that we can do nothing to earn. Unmerited. Free-flowing. Exuberant. In Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount begins with dessert first. It begins with Blessing. It is so very significant that in Matthew's telling of this Sermon, that it begins with grace, begins with blessing. Grace is the vehicle, the container, the suitcase that Jesus carries with him, and sits down on the mountainside to open up in front of the gathered people. He has this big suitcase called grace, and as he opens it up, sort of like Mary Poppins, he pulls out one blessing after another. But these aren't spoons full of sugar he's handing out, he's handing out the keys to fullness of life.

There is a famous story about a woman who was an earnest spiritual seeker who traveled halfway across the globe to learn from a very famous spiritual teacher. When she finally gained an audience with this teacher, she sat in his presence as he offered her tea and immediately began bombarding him with her questions and thoughts and arguments. She kept talking on and on and the teacher kept pouring tea. Suddenly she realized that tea was flowing out all over the table. She jumped up and asked what the teacher was doing. He calmly replied, "Since you came in here, you have been talking. You are like a full cup. There is no room for anything other than your questions. First empty yourself, and then receive what I teach."

Jesus is saying something very similar in today's scripture lesson. As we move through his list of what it means to be blessed, it becomes clear that

he is not talking about a brief fleeting experience of happiness, but about happiness at the deeper levels, as a way of being, an inclination of our heart and mind towards life. Let's look at what he describes:

1. *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

Poverty of spirit – blessed or happy because unlike material poverty – which is obvious by a particular material lack (of money, goods, ability to bend the will of others according to your own, etc.) poverty of spirit is interior, invisible, although it inevitably manifests itself in our attitudes, our comments, how we treat people, the decisions we make when we vote or what we do to people and with people, how we treat the earth and all creatures living on it, etc. Blessedness comes from the fact that we can only perceive our spiritual poverty by a special grace of God, whose presence reverberates like footsteps inside a hollow cavern.

What is interesting about this first description of blessedness is that fact that to be poor means to be empty. In order to receive the Kingdom of Heaven, we need to be empty, just like the woman in the story I just related. Our lives may be full of things, and full of activities, and full of errands, and full of responsibilities, and full of family obligations, and full of schoolwork, and full of assignments, and full places to go and people to meet – but our spirits are still empty. What this realization of our emptiness does is to raise up in us desire for more Presence, for companionship in our interior spaces. By truly acknowledging our spiritual emptiness, we can open ourselves up to receive the grace – the gift of the Presence of God, which is the Kingdom of Heaven.

2. *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."* Those who mourn – for they shall be comforted (or strengthened) – Note that the Greek for being comforted is a conjugate of Paraclete, the Comforter promised by Jesus to come to his followers after his death. Mourning is a time of experiencing and acknowledging and being vulnerable to our emptiness. This helps us to realize our participation and connection with other persons, so that when that connection is

broken, we experience the absence. The same is true with our connection to God.

3. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." The word we translate as "meek" refers to originally when a horse is tamed or brought under control, it refers to a tremendous power being focused. Jesus describes himself as being meek. In this context, Jesus begins to look at the issue of power and what true power is all about. Here he contrasts the power of heaven against the power of the world. The meek do not seek to seize control of the earth or the world. Rather they display an attitude of openness and receptivity – they receive the world that is presented to them as an inheritance. This attitude of receiving what presents itself to us opens us up to Grace. But it requires a humbleness of heart. Several years ago, I read an article in the Farmer's Almanac that talked about how to feed birds in your garden from your hand. The basic process was to sit very still in your backyard close to where birds normally gathered to feed. Place feed in your hand, and simply wait. Eventually, the birds might grow accustomed to your presence and slowly come closer. Eventually one might even venture close. If you are truly patient, and do not force your way around, they might come over to your hand and eat out of it. But the main idea was that you allowed the birds to feel safe, and not force anything. This is a key component of the spiritual life – not trying to be in control. Rather, we relinquish the desire to be in power, or a place of domination. Paul calls this having the mind of Christ. In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul quotes from a hymn that talks about Christ emptying himself of all of his heavenly glory and power and prerogatives in order to come among us as a servant. The key word in all of this is emptiness. In order to cultivate the mind of Christ, we have to become empty, to set aside our demand to be in control, and to control others.
4. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." In order to receive we need to acknowledge and embrace our emptiness. As we empty ourselves of our sense of privilegedness or our demand for control and possession, then we can

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be filled. In order to receive the realm of God – to make God’s reality a part of our reality – we need to prepare room for it in our lives and hearts.

My brothers and sisters, we are living in a time of high anxiety, fear, and inner emptiness. It is hard for people to consider themselves blessed. It is hard for people consider what true happiness might feel like, let alone consider that they might be able to experience happiness. And so, I want to declare to you this day that dessert comes first. Blessedness is not something we have to earn, to struggle after, to rack up a whole list of Brownie Points or earn a bunch of merit badges for. It is not one more thing to add to our list of errands or things to do or get. Sit back. Take a breath. Take another breath. Life is given to you as a gift. Open up to your inner emptiness and let the gift that is God come in. No struggles. No fighting. God’s love is there, ready to fill you. Release the tight grip you have on the reins of your life, and be surprised by how much you are loved, and carried, and blessed by God. Because you are – Blessed.