

January 22, 2023: THIS DAY'S SERMON – Beatitudes

Readings: Matthew 5:1-20; Psalm 1:1-3

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Let us pray: *Gracious God, in Jesus, you bear the light of hope into the world. Open our ears to your Word, that we might hear and speak it. Open our eyes to your Creation, that we might see and bless it. Open our hands to your abundance, that we might receive and share it. Open our hearts to your love, that we might bear it into the world. We pray not alone, but with Christ ... in Christ ... through Christ ... Jesus Christ, our Lord.. Amen.*

Through the waters of his baptism by John, Jesus received the blessing of God's righteousness: The condition of being acceptable to God. As a Jew, Jesus would have known the power of **BAR-ook** or blessing.

Almost every Jewish prayer, with the exception of the Shema, begins with the words "Baruch Ata Adonai"... "Blessed are You, our Lord". The people of Israel had a custom of making a blessing on almost anything, be it eating, drinking, observing a natural phenomena, even smelling a delightful aroma. They depicted all of these activities as nothing less than totally miraculous.

To bless God was to give God honor for his grace. In blessing God, God's presence within us is increased by acknowledging the goodness that God brings to our lives. It reminds us that to live fully is to be dependent on God's presence. To be blessed was not a recognition of riches, but a humble confession that one was not self sufficient.

Jesus would have known the power of blessing as he saw the crowds gathered before him. People in need of being seen; in need of healing and restoration. Ordinary, hard-living people held captive by their life circumstances and the burden of their sin. He would have understood that to bless and be blessed is a fundamental part of our relationship both with God and with other people.

It was to these people – and this world – that Jesus was sent to bring a ministry of healing. Jesus was – and is – the hope of God's presence in the world in human form.

In the world that clamored for his attention, Jesus would have recognized that blessing – whether given or received – was a means of recognizing God in one's life and a way of drawing closer to God. To bless meant to increase ... in joy and peacefulness.

This morning's scripture begins by telling us that Jesus "saw" the crowds. The Greek form of the word translated as "saw" is **hor-ah'-o**. It means to perceive, to attend to, to "see with the mind" or perceive with a spiritual perception. As Jesus saw the crowds, he also saw their pain and their need. It

would stand to reason, then, that his teaching would include blessing.

And, yet, scripture tells us that after seeing the crowds, Jesus went up to the mountain, sat down, and his disciples came to him. And he began to speak, and taught them ... and what we know as the Beatitudes began to flow.

As followers of Christ, as people choosing to learn from Jesus, we're called to look – beyond our own selves and our own needs – to the needs of the world around us.

Through the teachings of Jesus, we are learning to not just see the world, but to see it with a spiritual perception; and it seems obvious that the world we are looking at is still deeply in need of blessing.

Jesus came to earth and took on flesh to show us the face of God's love. God is love. While on earth, Jesus called his followers to "incarnate" – to make real this love within ourselves and to carry it into the world.

Pastor Phil shared a story with me that makes the truth of God's love clear. As he was exploring his faith, he went to his pastor, Mike Keys, and asked where a good place was to start in the bible. Pastor Mike told him to begin with 1 John, Chapter 4, Verse 8: "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."

One of the ways we can carry the love that is God into the world is through the power of blessing found in the Beatitudes this morning. We do not have to look very far in order to perceive where that love is needed. It is needed in the midst of the brokenness and pain of the world around us and even within us.

In her book on spiritual disciplines, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun reminds us that each one of us comes into this world hungry for human welcome, blessing and encouragement. We need to hear that we are wanted and valued – that in God's eyes we are beautifully and wonderfully made.

Adele goes on to say that "when we are blessed and encouraged, we are better able to internalize our value, worth and dignity. Without life-giving words, we fail to thrive emotionally and physically, and when blessing and encouragement go missing, the evil one plants lies about how worthless or stupid or – you fill in the blank – we are."

When these lies metastasize, they reveal themselves in anger, sadness, depression and the need to pretend. They poison the joy and delight of being alive. When that becomes the norm, to long for a kind word of validation is often perceived as

self-centered neediness.

The fact remains that we all need to hear the words that God spoke on the first day of creation: “This is good. Very Good!” We all need to hear the words God spoke to Jesus even before his ministry began: “You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.” We all need to hear this, not just once, but often, and to deny we need it is to deny our humanity.

This morning’s scripture – and all of scripture – is packed with blessings. God blesses. Jesus blesses. Priests and kings and prophets bless. Parents bless children. The old bless the young. Being blessed, beloved, and chosen is core to God’s vision of who we are ... and it is essential to what God desires the world to become.

This morning, Jesus gives us the gift of learning how to carry God’s blessing into the world. As we bless those around us, we are reminded of who we are, which helps us to sow the fruit of God’s love in the world.

But what about those times when something within us causes us to withhold blessing? In truth, we probably all have those moments. When we do, it is helpful to notice them and ask ourselves some questions:

- What feels empty or threatened within me?
- Do I feel others have enough recognition and do not need more?
- Am I afraid someone will take my place if I give him or her too much credit?
- Why am I refusing to delight in this person?
- Have I overlooked this person’s gifts?

In his book, *Sacred Fire*, Ronald Rolheiser writes, “When we act like God, we get to feel like God.” Blessing enlarges our hearts. When we speak God’s love into a life, we help that person build a shield of truth around their heart which protects them from the accuser.

God’s delight shields us. God’s Spirit does not accuse, condemn, nor destroy us. And when God challenges us and convicts our hearts, God does not love us any less. God continues to delight in us, just as he did in Jesus even before he began his earthly ministry.

As we consider how and where and when we might bless others, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which we, ourselves, are blessed, because it often comes to us in unexpected ways.

I experienced it last night. I had promised Caroline that I would come over to check that the bathroom doors were unlocked because we have been having issues with the new automatic locking system.

As I stepped into the hallway, a young woman was cleaning in the classroom near the bathrooms. She greeted me with a bright smile and was soon joined by a young man who was working with her. They asked if I was Pastor Janet and said they had questions about when we worship.

As they expressed thanks for their cleaning job and took note of all of the work we are doing around the building, I felt a sense of blessing that flowed through their words, their gratitude, their acknowledgment of me as pastor and our work together as a congregation. Their blessing did not require the words “God bless you”. The fact that they recognize who and whose we are said it all.

My blessing was increased when I reached into the Prayer Box and pulled out two notes. The first read: “Dear Pastor Janet. Thank you for all you’ve done. Everett Michalak.” The second asked that we “Please pray for all alone and lost.” How blessed are we that God claims us as his own and entrusts us with bringing the blessing of his love into the world in so very many ways.

As we prepare to go into the world to fill it with blessing, let us begin by placing our hands over our hearts and repeating God’s words spoken through the Prophet Jeremiah: “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” Say it again now. Say it again throughout the day and in the coming days. Say it to others. Say it until you believe it and they believe it. Carry it into the world as a blessing on others.

And now receive this blessing:

The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make His face to shine upon you
and be gracious unto you.
The Lord look upon you with His favor
and give you peace.

Amen