

Ben Wideman at University Mennonite Church

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Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

And 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 the sake of righteousness, 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.

Good morning, UMC. Welcome to February, to Black History Month, and to this short cold month which offers hope that spring might just be around the corner despite frigid temperatures and snow blanketing the ground. We are gathered this morning to reflect on the Beatitudes, a funny word that we no longer include in our daily lives, but still exists here in our faith communities.

So what even is a Beatitude? “Beatitudes” were common sense sayings, expressing the conventional wisdom of the day. Perhaps they served a similar function to the kinds of wisdom sayings we still use today: “The early bird gets the worm”; “The squeaky wheel gets the grease”; “All good things must come to an end (especially vacations)”... These modern proverbs or sayings are supposed to state the truth of how things really are.

The Beatitudes take place in Matthew’s Gospel, where Jesus begins teaching his followers. Matthew 5 is at the beginning of three chapters that we categorize as the Sermon on the Mount. We might picture an elevated location where Jesus’ message is being proclaimed to those who have gathered. It was a moral teaching moment of how to live out the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven as Matthew puts it) here on earth, setting the tables for the active parts of Jesus’ ministry that are still to come.

If Mennonites have traditionally held on to the notion that scripture provides us with a guidebook for how to live our lives, the Gospel stories about Jesus - and more specifically the Sermon on the Mount - is a guide within a guide, core teachings that have taken precedence over other counterpoints in scripture.

Scripture is full of wisdom moments similar to the Sermon on the Mount, but there is something perplexing about the tone that Jesus sets with the Beatitudes. It's hard for those of us raised in faith spaces to look at these verses with fresh eyes, but let's try and do so this morning.

Those gathered to hear what this Jesus fellow has to say must have been floored when he began to list these blessings. Imagine with me... (SLIDE)

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

Wait. Did Jesus just say those who are poor in spirit get the keys to the kingdom? What does poor in spirit even mean? Is it based on how much money we make, or just how defeated our spirit feels at this moment in time? And *how* are they blessed? Is it a material blessing, or something else?

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Did he skip something about the poor in spirit? He's already moved on to the next group of strangely blessed people. My friend just lost his best buddy to cancer. Is that who he means? Maybe he'll expand on point two...

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.

Meek? Is he talking about that quiet person at church who selflessly cleans up after every potluck, but never speaks up during the service? They get the whole earth?? I'm not sure where this is heading, and I'm getting more confused.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Those are people I know... those who are standing up to ICE right now in Minnesota, or confronting systemic poverty or racism. But I'm not sure what it means for them to be filled during a time like this when it feels so helpless. And

by the way, what happened to the poor, those mourning, or those who are meek? Can we slow down to talk about those first??

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 the sake of righteousness, 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.

Oh my goodness. Jesus sure gave us a lot to figure out here. And for those who like to skip ahead in the story, from this list of Beatitude sayings, Jesus pivots to talking about his followers as light of the world, and salt of the earth. He moves quickly to talk about not throwing out the Hebrew scripture, but enhancing it, reinterpreting, and reimagining. His teachings are not specific, but broad and interpretive, and guess what, that freedom to interpret has given birth to church squabbles over who has the right take or interpretation for just about the entirety of the 2000 years of church history.

What are some of the ways that we've argued about the Beatitudes? Well I'm glad you asked.

Throughout Christian history we've argued about whether these Beatitudes are literal, or metaphysical. Some of us have felt strongly that Jesus is talking about literal hunger, literal grief, literal purity, literal persecution. This comes out most in contexts where real people are struggling with these real things, and they often divide along lines you would expect. American slave owners downplayed the literal interpretation side - as Christians with privilege and power over others, they felt like Jesus could not possibly have been talking about those who are beneath them. Of course, those whom they were oppressing took the more literal approach. Enslaved peoples would have held on tight to the idea that those

being persecuted will one day receive a blessing or our reward because they were in literal pain, literal persecution at that moment.

Sometimes these verses have even been used by oppressors to justify systemic violence - why should a person complain about their lot in life when the scriptures say you'll be rewarded for said pain?

Christians have argued about whether the beatitudes are prescriptive or descriptive. That is, do they tell us how we should live in order to be blessed by God, or are they describing who is *already* blessed by God because of how they are currently living? Those of us with wealth, happiness, privilege, etc. should we cast aside those things to find deeper meaning? Is this really a message about the more you have, the less you are spiritually healthy? This posture has been embraced by simple living movements, by folks who have taken a vow of poverty or intentionally chosen to be rooted in communities with deep need.

Those who like to compare how the four gospel accounts differ like to note that Luke's gospel doesn't just point out those who are blessed, it also offers a list of contrasting woes, apparently condemning those from places of comfort. Luke's gospel offers a far more literal message, Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your consolation. Whew, it's hard to argue that Luke doesn't believe this is a specific direction.

The Global Church has historically argued about whether the Beatitudes are projecting God's Kingdom in some far off distant future, or if they are describing glimmers of God's Kingdom here and now.

Are they describing some strange aspect of a future heaven, allowing us to avoid dealing with how we live out our lives in the here and now? You see this best in the way that the increasing wealth of western Christians has allowed them to take a posture that the most important thing we do is save souls and get people into heaven. In fact some of the folks from that branch of the church have transformed the challenge of wealth to a theology of prosperity, claiming that wealth is really a blessing for those who live a righteous life. The beatitudes merely remind us not to dwell when we're down and out, our faith means a reward will soon transform those bleak moments into luxurious ones.

(SLIDE) And of course there is this final line from our passage this morning. A reward in heaven. Christians with a specific focus in the afterlife might strive to live out the Beatitudes hoping to build up even more credits to cash in at the pearly gates. But pause with me - many biblical scholars, much wiser than me, believe Matthew uses Kingdom of Heaven, rather than Kingdom of God, primarily out of reverence for God's name, reflecting the Jewish custom never to speak aloud the name of Yahweh. Heaven is a placeholder for anything of God in the here and now. Matthew also makes this intentional decision to emphasize the heavenly, spiritual, and future nature of God's reign, contrasting it with earthly kingdoms that eventually fall to the wayside.

So then what? Why is it important to wrestle with these beatitudes? And some days I'm not so sure. There are times when I find myself throwing up my hands and suggesting that we may never know. It's far too complex, too layered with selfish human interpretations to ever know what Jesus really intended.

But I think what matters in this conversation is the way that it transforms our day to day lives.

Here's a good example...

Last week Mennonite Central Committee posted a lengthy message on social media (SLIDE) urging its followers to pay attention to what is happening in Minnesota. Many are opting out of work and school to take part in a march and economic pause," read the post, "Faith leaders from across the U.S. are flying in to attend and will play a crucial role in highlighting the message of hospitality and love of neighbor. MCC encouraged people to consider a boycott of corporations that support ICE in Minnesota and beyond, and demanded that Congress cut funding to ICE and Customs and Border Protection.

To say that this did not go over well with some of their followers would be putting it mildly. People were outraged that MCC was getting political, and that they were taking a side. MCC has a history, after all, of trying to be a bridge between progressive and conservative branches of the Mennonite tradition - an emulsifier, as Kevin King noted last week - so this post felt too polarizing in an already divided cultural moment. (SLIDE) This seemed noteworthy enough for Penn Live

to write an article titled, “Pacifist Christian group with deep Pa. roots draws fire for protesting ICE in Minnesota.”

Pushback was significant enough that Linda Espanshade, a spokeswoman for MCC, said the call to join the protest had been made by an arm of the organization, not Mennonite Central Committee itself. “MCC is not, as an organization, involved in the protests, in the demonstrations, or in civil disobedience,” she said. “That’s not something we’re doing as an organization.”

Hmmm... interesting.

Penn Live posted this quote pulled from the comments on Facebook (SLIDE) – *“I am so disappointed in this post, God has always had rules and laws. We need to be supporting ice and praying for their safety. They are removing illegal immigrants and most of them have prison records.”*

This person was not considering the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are striving for peace for the oppressed. No, what was important was following the law of the land, as God instructs us.

Here's the thing before we grumble about this kind of posture, and why this matters when we look at the Beatitudes. You can pick up a Bible, and find your way to an interpretation that winds up standing alongside protestors pushing back at ICE agents. You can pick up that same Bible and find yourself in a place not too unlike this comment. (SLIDE) Perhaps this person was thinking of the Beatitudes when she wrote - maybe she sees ICE agents in her mind when she reads Jesus' words, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

Scripture has been used to affirm slavery, racism, and white nationalism, while also being used to combat those systemic challenges. Setting aside that person's wild misconception that most illegal immigrants have prison records, there are plenty of Bible verses that urge for Christian respect for civic structures and order.

So then we might ask, what is truly at the heart of our calling as Christians? At this moment in time, there seem to be a significant number of folks like this

commenter, who feel like the heart of our calling is to preserve federal law and order, no matter the cost.

As a church that believes in God's endless and boundless love - especially for those the world labels as "the least of these," isn't it fulfilling the greatest commandment when we align ourselves with those most in need? If we are truly called to love God and love our neighbor, then that must be the lens we use to interpret any biblical passage or moment in time.

The Bible **must** be a transformative, and life-giving document. Black History Month is the perfect time to remember that the African American story reminds us that God's word is not bound by history, but keeps speaking to us in new and culture-shifting ways. Freedom from the old law of slavery, freedom from the old laws of political suppression. In fact the Beatitudes specifically, have shaped the African American church in profound ways. In fact, (SLIDE) author Carol Boston Weatherford published this beautiful children's book in 2009 titled, *The Beatitudes: From Slavery to Civil Rights*, retelling the Black story weaving this scripture from Matthew 5 into historic events and people.

(SLIDE) In her *Sojourners* article, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Theology of Resistance*, from back in 2017, theologian, author, and podcaster, Lindsay Paris-Lopez wrote,

How are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the ones who hunger and thirst for justice, blessed? Jesus blessed the people on the margins of his culture by embracing them, showing solidarity with them, building a community in which those who had always been shunned were welcomed and loved. As the body of Christ, we are called to be that blessing.

Suffering far outlasts any administration, and our commitment to the needs of those suffering must transcend partisanship. One problem with connecting advocacy to partisan political outrage is that often the needs of the people get lost in the desire to "win." Jesus's vision of healing a world in pain begins with blessing, not blame, so that we may keep our focus on those most in need of comfort.

As Paris-Lopez points out, the beatitudes are a re-centering, and an especially profound one for those of us with a bit of privilege or power. In the eyes of the world, those Jesus is addressing are worthless and powerless. If you are hungry, hurting, longing for change, this message is for you. Know that you are where God can be found, a deep spiritual empathy for those in need, and the kingdom of God was made not in spite of, but exactly for people just like you.

(SLIDE) And so if we find ourselves on the flipside, if we find that our privilege prevents us from being poor, hungry, in mourning, etc., the way to truly discover where God is moving is to position ourselves to be a blessing to those most marginalized and alienated. And to position ourselves with empathy, trying to join God's Spirit, suffering with those who suffer, feel pain with those who are hurting, call out for justice with those who are marginalized.

One major caveat is that scripture provides us the opportunity to disagree. And maybe you're hearing my words this morning thinking that I've got it all wrong. This morning our extended communion might be a chance to talk more with each other about your thoughts on the Beatitudes - are they a list of things for some far off heavenly kingdom? Are they a prescription of postures we need to be living out?

And so UMC, how will our congregation hold the Beatitudes moving forward? Perhaps by lifting up marginalized voices, or by confronting our own privilege. What would it look like to be persecuted for righteousness? Maybe we can take active steps toward restorative justice. Perhaps all of the above, as we seek to join God's Spirit in being a blessing to those who are poor in spirit, mourning, hungry and thirsting for righteousness, meek, merciful, longing for peace, or carrying the weight of the persecuted.