

Epiphany 4 A
January 29, 2023
Matthew 5:1-12

“Blessings All Around”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

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.”

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My dad would have turned 66 years old last Sunday. My dad loved to sing. In truth, he had a song for everything. In truth, it could be

obnoxious. I mean, I might have overslept my alarm, had the worst day at school, gotten the biggest pimple on my nose, and received a B on a test – catastrophe! And my dad would break into a song like this one:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God has done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.¹*

Seriously, Dad? I'm wallowing in self-pity right now – I don't feel like counting my blessings! Not gonna lie, I feel somewhat the same reaction to Jesus' words in our text from Matthew's gospel.

Imagine, for a moment, that you are among the throng of dusty, tired peasants following a new teacher with a hopeful message about the kingdom of heaven. You don't know what to expect. All you know is that you're tired: tired of being poor – of scraping together a meager living in a tired land, tired of feeling like an outsider in the place of your birth, tired of being treated like a dog by the Roman oppressors. This teacher isn't afraid to sit with you, eat with you, live with you. He touches the sick and outcast and proclaims a good news that actually feels like good news for you. You follow him up the rocky side of Mt. Eremos and sit down among the grass and dirt and scrub. You look out across the fertile plain of Gennesaret – everything looks better from up here. And then the teacher speaks:

Blessed are the poor in spirit.
Blessed are those who mourn.
Blessed are the meek.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst.
Blessed are the merciful.
Blessed are the pure in heart.
Blessed are the peacemakers.
Blessed are the persecuted.

¹ Oatman, Johnson Jr., "Count Your Blessings," published 1897.

How might you react? If I'm completely honest, I think it would be a struggle for me to stay seated. I think it would be a struggle not to simply stand up and shout: "I don't believe you, Jesus! I just don't. Know why? Because the world I live in values wealth, has little time for grieving, rewards go-getters, regards mercy as weakness and peacemaking as contradictory to financial well-being, places power above law, and lets the powerful define truth. So, no Jesus, I'm not blessed. If I'm poor and grieving and meek and hungry and thirsty and merciful and pure and persecuted and making peace in *my* world, then I am the opposite of blessed. What kind of world are you living in?!" I think it would be a struggle for me to sit there and receive Jesus' words – almost the way I struggled with my dad singing "count your blessings." Am I missing something or were both of them – Jesus and Dad – a little out of touch?

Commentators suggest many different interpretations of the Beatitudes, Jesus' list of the blessed, but there are two that I find particularly compelling—two that challenge my assertion that Jesus was out of touch. Firstly, one commentator states that:

Jesus isn't setting up conditions or terms but rather is just plain blessing people. All kinds of people. All kinds of down-and-out, extremely vulnerable, and at the bottom of the ladder people. Why? To proclaim that God regularly shows up in mercy and blessing just where you least expect God to be—with the poor rather than the rich, those who are mourning rather than celebrating, the meek and the peacemakers rather than the strong and victorious. This is not where citizens of the ancient world look for God and, quite frankly, it's not where citizens of our own world do either. If God shows up here, Jesus is saying, blessing the weak and the vulnerable, then God will be everywhere, showering all creation and its inhabitants with blessing.²

In other words, the beatitudes aren't if/then statements: if you are poor,

² Lose, David. "God Bless You," *workingpreacher.org*, January 23, 2011, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1542>.

then you are blessed; if you are meek, then you are blessed, and so on. No, the commentator is suggesting that Jesus knew that his audience was all of those things and so he blessed them. Do any of us find ourselves in need of a word of blessing today?

A second compelling interpretation comes from the Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis. She argues that, “The Gospel is a word of protest” and “The Beatitudes are not just a blessing but a call to action . . . for the sake of creating the world God imagines.”³ Who, I wonder, are the poor, the mourning, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, peacemakers, and the persecuted in our world today and what does the gospel call us to do about it?

Blessing and action. That’s what the Beatitudes are – a literal blessing of people who likely don’t feel particularly blessed and a call to action for the sake of creating the world of heaven’s dream.

Today, I’m going to invite us to do something unusual. In much of the Christian tradition, we are under the false assumption that only ministers can offer words of blessing. I’d like you to turn to your neighbor – it could be someone you know or someone you don’t – raise a hand in blessing and repeat after me:

May God bless you, my friend:
you who are poor in spirit
you who mourn,
you who are meek and gentle,
you who hunger and thirst,
you who are merciful,
you who are the pure in heart.
you who are a peacemaker,
you who are persecuted.
May God bless you, my friend,
that you might be a blessing to others. Amen.

³ Lewis, Caroline. “Righteous Living,” *workingpreacher.org*, January 22, 2017, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4802>.

Now, like Jesus did when he blessed his hearers on the mountain side, we too have blessed and continue to bless one another: those poor, mourning, meek, hungry and thirsty, merciful, pure in heart, persecuted, and peacemakers. But the gospel is not *just* a call to blessing. It is a call to action. Who, I wonder, are those poor, mourning, meek, hungry and thirsty, merciful, pure in heart, persecuted, and peacemakers in our world today and what does the gospel call us—call *you*—to do about it?

May we be attentive to the spirit's leading as we are called beyond blessing, to action for the sake of creating the world of heaven's dream. May it be so. Amen.