

“To Bless and Be Blessed”  
Matthew 5:1-12  
Sermon Preached by Thomas P. Markey  
John Knox Presbyterian Church  
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I don't know about you all, but I always find this time of year to be particularly difficult. We've made it through the holidays – the presents have been opened and the decorations (for the most part) have been put away. We've begrudgingly oriented ourselves back to our normal day-to-day routines. The alarm clocks are once again being set and, much to our disappointment, they faithfully ring every morning. Most days, as we make our way outside for the day, we are met with a bitter cold. The days are short and the nights are long. The warm and refreshing air of the spring seems like an unattainable reality.

If it sounds like I'm whining and complaining – I am! The winter blues are back and they're back in full force.

So, as I was preparing this sermon, adding it to my ledger of “winter complaints,” I did what any faithful and dedicated millennial would do, I got out my phone. I checked my email. I mindlessly surfed the internet. I checked social media. I posted pictures of my adorable children on social media. I offered my social and political opinions on social media. And, in a last-ditch effort to waste more time, I scrolled through a sea of old pictures and videos on my phone, most of which were more adorable pictures and videos of Ella and Eden. That is when, in the midst of my scrolling, I came across a picture that I had taken in September of this past year. It was a picture I took here at John Knox. The picture is of a sign that is hanging in the hallway by the preschool classrooms. In warning parents to not become too preoccupied with the academic abilities of their children, the sign states,

“Teach them to sit with those sitting alone. Teach them to be kind. Teach them to offer their help. Teach them to be a friend to the lonely. Teach them to encourage others. Teach them to think about other people. Teach them to share. Teach them to look for the good. This is how they'll change the world.”

I like to imagine that this is context to which we find ourselves located into today's reading. As we heard last week, Jesus has recently called his initial disciples – Peter, Andrew, James, and John – and they have been busy on the road. As scripture tells us,

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread

throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.<sup>1</sup>

If the disciples were anything like I am, the initial allure of having been called by Jesus as his disciples was likely beginning to wear off. Sure, in the beginning it was really exciting – all of the miracles, all of the preaching, all of the teaching, all of healing. But now they’ve been at it for some time. The excitement is running thin and the daily grind – long days of healing and curing – have got the disciples worn out. They’re experiencing their very own case of the winter blues.

Searching for an escape they pull out their phones and their selfie sticks and begin snapping. They post the pictures immediately - #miracleworker #disciples #whatwouldjesusdo

Aware that the news of Jesus is spreading they also turn to their phones to get a glimpse of what the world is saying. Sadducees, Pharisees, and Gentiles – everyone has got an opinion and they’re eager and anxious to share it! Don’t worry, the disciples were sure to get in on the action as well, they were flooding folks’ timelines with pictures, quoting scripture, and reposting blog entries from their favorite local bloggers.

That’s when Jesus – aware of all that is going on, all that is being said, and all that is being speculated about – decides that it is time. It is time to offer his inaugural address, the Sermon on the Mount. Quite simply, Jesus had a word to preach and he was going to preach it.

And as we heard read today, Jesus’ initial remarks begin with a powerful proclamation – a series of nine blessings, a revelation of the ways in which we might not only be blessed, but how we might bless others.

For us contemporary readers and listeners, it is easy for us to hear and interpret these words of Jesus in very superficial and shallow ways. Jesus isn’t simply telling us all to become poor, to mourn more, to strive for meekness, or to settle for being hungry and thirsty. No, Jesus’ words are far more radical, far more provocative than that. Jesus’ words are serving as an initial ushering in of the Kingdom of God. It is in this coming realm – God’s Kingdom – that “all things will take place according to God’s purposes of love and justice.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, in this way, “to be blessed is not simply to be happy, but to know that one is included in the coming realm.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 4:23-25, NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald J. Allen, “Matthew 5:1-12” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A*, Vol 1., 309.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

As one commentator writes, “Through the Beatitudes, Matthew assures the community that while life may be difficult now, those who faithfully endure can look forward to the realm. When the Beatitudes say that the community is blessed, they do not mean that everyone is bubbly, but that in the midst of turmoil, the congregation can live with confidence because they know they are secure.”<sup>4</sup>

Those that Jesus claims to be “blessed” might not always be the individuals and/or communities that we anticipate to be blessed. Yet, that is the radical love that Jesus has come to set forth. Jesus is calling for a reversal of the status quo. Jesus is calling for a radical Kingdom – the Kingdom of God – to be realized both now and in the future. It is a radical Kingdom in which God has called us and continues to call us to be a part of. It is a Kingdom where we see, encounter, and engage the world in new and “blessed” ways.

I’m not sure that this particular passage could have come at a more appropriate time. We are in the midst of profound transition – most of us are feeling, in one way or another, anxious about the future fruits of our world. Some of us are rejoicing. Others of us are lamenting. Either way, it feels as though our nation, even our world, is jockeying for the primary position of those who are truly God’s most blessed.

But that’s the point very point of the Beatitudes – Jesus is saying that all of us have already been marked by God’s blessedness. Conservative and liberal. Democrat and Republican. Black, brown, and white. Gay and straight. Pro-life and pro-choice. Male and female. Muslim, Jew, and Christian. All of us will be called children of God.

The question is, are willing to recognize the blessedness in each other? Or have we become so preoccupied about and with our own blessedness and the blessedness of those who are most like us, that we fail to see a child of God staring back at us even when they might look, act, talk, and/or think differently than we do?

Remember that picture I spoke about in the beginning? The one about parents and warning them to not become too preoccupied with their children’s academic ability. As I read and re-read those lines – all nine of them – I couldn’t help but draw a direct correlation between those gentle reminders and the blessings of the Beatitudes.

“My children, don’t become so preoccupied about your place in the Kingdom. The table has been set and your seat has been saved. Instead, in this time, in this world, may you offer your blessedness as you recognize the blessedness in others,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 311

Blessed are those who pull up a chair, for in the Kingdom of Heaven no one sits alone.

Blessed are those who kindle a spirit of kindness, for in the Kingdom of Heaven kindness is loved and justice is done as we walk humbly with our God.

Blessed are those who hurry to help, for in the Kingdom of Heaven all of our burdens will be made light.

Blessed are those who befriend the bewildered and love the lonely, for in the Kingdom of Heaven all will find peace and comfort.

Blessed are those who offer encouragement, for in the Kingdom of Heaven issues of image and self-worth will be erased. For all will know they are children of God.

Blessed are those who think first about others, for in the Kingdom of Heaven God's grace will guide us.

Blessed are those who are willing to share, for in the Kingdom of Heaven there is room in the sandbox for all of God's children.

Blessed are those who search for the good, for in the Kingdom of Heaven God's goodness shines bright.

Blessed are those who will change the world, for in the Kingdom of Heaven we will find ourselves renewed and restored, made new by God's overwhelming love. Let us rejoice and be glad!"

Thanks be to God for the blessedness in each and every one of you. Amen.