

## **Matthew 5:1-20 (The Beatitudes)**

Following the slaying of the toddlers, the escape to and return from Egypt, his baptism, and the temptation in the desert, Jesus was going about in all of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, healing all disease and all sickness in the people.

Seeing the crowd following him, Jesus went up 'into' the mountain. In Matthew's gospel, mountains are places of special events and proclamations. The mention of a mountain is a signal that something important is about to happen. Imagine this as theatre. Jesus goes up to the place of special revelation. He sits down and his disciples come to him and arrange themselves around him.

The Beatitudes are actually an introduction to the Sermon on the Mount which is three whole chapters long. Although the sermon was primarily for the instruction of Jesus' disciples, it was within earshot of the crowds. Jesus is teaching about the "reign of God," which is not just about life in heaven. The "reign of God" is meant for the here-and-now as well as in heaven. This is what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer - "your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven ..."

Beatitudes were not a new thing in the world of Jesus. Usually, they were common sense sayings that expressed what everyone already

knew. They were short sayings that expressed the conventional wisdom. “Blessed are those on a low fat diet, for they will have healthy arteries” – that sort of wisdom.

The Kingdom of Heaven, which is mentioned three times in twelve short verses, is not referring to a place we go to when we die, but to God’s reign experienced and lived here on earth. And the picture we see in this short introduction to the sermon is nothing short of being world-changing. These are not commandments which we must obey, as if Jesus were trying to say, “blessed are those who become ...” Rather, these are statements of the way the world really works, the way God’s reign operates, the way reality looks when seen from God’s perspective. Whatever the powers-that-be may tell us, however we may believe society functions, Jesus is drawing back a veil, revealing what’s really going on, and inviting us to enter into this new life.

Many sermons have been preached on this challenging list of blessings. Some draw their energy from words like “spirit” and “righteousness” and “pure.” This gives them a pious flavour, and urges the things that generalized religiosity encourages. Others summon words like “persecuted” and “revile” and “salt” and “light.” These sermons may have a warlike feel, and imagine the world to be at war with Christians. Other sermons spin themselves around the “light of the world” and urge exceedingly rigorous righteousness.

While all of these sermon options work and fit nicely into our North American religious context, most do not take into consideration Matthew's story or context, and try to make their sermons fit our North American context rather than Matthew's. These blessings ring true in Matthew's narrative, as does the whole of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew's Jesus blesses the mourners, and any attentive audience will remember Rachel's wailing in an earlier chapter. Rachel was brought into the story from the deep memory of the Jewish people where she mourns the exiles being force-marched into oblivion.

Babylon destroyed Jerusalem along with the Temple, and with the Temple the sense that life was stable, safe, and predictable. And before that, Assyria destroyed an entire ten-twelfths of the people who remembered God's promises to Sarah and Abraham and David, scattering them and driving them from history. In Matthew's story, Rachel returns to mourn the innocent toddlers murdered by Herod. This is not grief in general; it is grief still fresh and raw; the corpses of the little children still litter the story-telling stage. Do mothers who lose their children, especially to violence, ever forget?

Most translations of the Beatitudes, offer "comfort" to Bethlehem's mourners, though it is impossible to imagine any comfort adequate to the depth of their loss. The Greek word used here, does not refer to the kind of comfort that does its work with hugs and hand-holding. It offers comfort in the form of exhortation, of calling the mourner out from

immobility into action. If we read the scene this way, we will have to find a way to imagine who offers this exhortation, and what it can actually accomplish - not an easy task.

This word, used for comfort - *parakaleo* - has another meaning that might be helpful here. It can refer to the “calling” that comes to a witness in court. A crime has been committed, and witnesses are called to speak the truth straightforwardly. If this is the sense Matthew’s storyteller intends, then those mourners will indeed be able to act as witnesses. Everyone in Matthew’s audience, disciples and listeners, will be able to add their voices as well, especially since Matthew, along with the other canonical gospels, comes to us out of the empty aftermath of the crushing of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome (66-70 CE).

The role and identity of the mourners helps make sense of the first group blessed in the list: the “poor in spirit.” Interpreters grab hold of the word “spirit” and make this blessing somehow “spiritual,” probably to intensify the focus on a supposedly, higher plane that is heavenly and not stuck in earthly ruts. But the Greek, *pneuma* means “breath” as much as it means “spirit,” and it is easy to imagine Matthew’s mourners being “broken in breath.” If Matthew’s Jesus is blessing those whose breath comes in sobs, it makes sense that they would be offered the dominion of heaven.

Other blessings are pronounced on those who have been hunted - a

proper meaning for the Greek word translated as “persecuted,” because of righteousness. Righteousness, in a Jewish text, refers to glad observance of Torah, which means that this blessing is pronounced on those who are hunted for being Jewish.

Again the narrative context hands us the residents of Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph’s hometown in Matthew’s story, and the home of David long before that. The toddlers, and those who died defending them, were caught up in Herod’s hunt for the “king of the Jews.” And the memories of previous generations hand us the citizens of Eastern and Western Europe who discovered that they were not French or Dutch, or German or Czech, or Hungarian or Polish in the eyes of Nazis - they were only Jews, six million of whom lost their lives in the Holocaust. They are remembered today and also are blessed with the dominion of the heavens.

In Matthew’s narrative, this cannot be read as encouraging passivity and submission to those with the power to abuse. This story is too powerfully aware of Herod’s crime, and the blessings too carefully name the mourners and sufferers. Peace can only be made by the mercy that raises life out of death. This, of course, is acted out at the end of the story with the resurrection. But, the same thematic argument is being made here. In the face of real violence and real abuse, mercy and gentleness are world-making miracles.

It has been suggested by John Hansen that all of Matthew's story is a reflection on the Lord's Prayer. He is probably right. This part of the story comes down to a powerful praying that God's will be done on earth. This is not a prayer of submission, it is a demand: the beauty of God's will, perfectly enacted in heaven does no good if it does not also shape life in God's real world, the realm of Creation. Neither the Lord's Prayer nor the Beatitudes force us to passively accept the damage that is freely done in everyday life. Both assert that God's will is done when we refuse to remain enmeshed in the cycle of abuse and retribution. The blessings contained in this odd little collection, each and every one of them require a miracle, even a resurrection. That's what it will take for God's will to be done in our workaday life.

Those who use Facebook, know that many users can end up with a lot of friends they don't even know. Maybe that's how Jesus feels. Many people ask to be his friend, and when he confirms these fans, they never give him another thought. Many people claim to be his friend and really are barely acquainted with his life story and teachings, much less willing to live by them.

Matthew's Beatitudes bear the message that Jesus wants not more fans or friends, but followers and disciples. Matthew, more so than the other gospel writers, emphasizes that to be a disciple means to live by the teachings of Jesus. A major theme is genuine righteousness. This righteousness purifies the inward life and energizes us to seek justice for

the vulnerable.

The motif is further developed in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus urges hearers to be obedient to the law of God in such a radical way as to exceed the zeal for righteousness of even the Pharisees. Matthew's Jesus is painted as Israel's ultimate, God-authorized teacher. The message is clear: believing in Jesus means living in accordance with his teachings. Jesus' blessedness has a this-worldly character. It is in the midst of this life and creation, a creation restored by Christ, in which this blessed state is found. While this state begins and grows in this present life, it is only fully realized in the time to come.

Jesus calls the church to season and enlighten the world. You are the light of the world; you are the salt of the earth. He is not addressing the Galileans or the Jerusalemites. He is addressing you and me. Tell yourself, "I am the light of the world." "We are the light of the world." Healthy self-affirmation, embracing every one, gives us a sense of joy and inspires us to bring forth the light and life in others. Congregations and followers of Jesus are called to be flavourful: to season the world; to add zest to life; to bring out the holy flavour of every situation.

Jesus' words are both affirmative and challenging. "You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world...let your light shine." Don't play small; you are about God's business. Don't minimize your impact; one act of love can change the world. Your deepest nature is enlightenment,

the revealing light of God. We can let our light shine not out of ego or the quest for notoriety, but to give light and direction to the world and to proclaim God's glory.

Jesus challenges his listeners to take the moral high ground, and to exceed the religious teachers in their righteousness and morality. These days the bar is set low in the body politic. In a time in which environmental laws and human rights may be at risk, we need to set our own moral compasses in alignment with God's vision of Shalom. We need to be the change we want to see in the world as we chart ways to live more simply, to exceed the Paris Accords in our lifestyles, to reach out to persons of different religions. And to provide hospitality to the forgotten and traumatized, and sanctuary to those who are at risk.

The Beatitudes turn conventional wisdom upside down. Fans of Jesus – not followers or true disciples – admire Jesus' idealism and spirit of sacrifice. Fans have a different set of Beatitudes: Blessed are the self-reliant (not the poor in spirit), the cheerful (not those who mourn), the bold (not the meek), the proactive and the ambitious (not the merciful), those with a single driving ambition (not the pure in heart), those who stand up for themselves and are bullies (not the peacemakers), those who have a high quality of life (not the persecuted), and those who have a good reputation (not those who are reviled and slandered).

Followers and disciples of Jesus take him at his word and put his upside-



down beatitudes to the test. The life of discipleship is a process of shifting our status from fan to disciple of Jesus in the specific scenes and situations of our daily lives. It's a risky replacement of one definition of what it means to be blessed with another.

When we manifest humble dependence on God's grace, God makes us contributors to the divine reign on earth. What happens when we lament, not just our personal sorrows, but those of all who are subjected to injustice, and are moved to do something about it; when we embrace meekness, not as passivity, but as proactive humility that is a key ingredient of strong leadership; when we "hunger and thirst to see right prevail" and put our actions behind our appetite and dream for justice; when we embrace compassion and forgiveness, recognizing them as actions and not merely attitudes; when we ask God continually to purify us from all inward motivations that do not spring from God; when we work for peace in the midst of people and communities in conflict; when we pray to have the heart of a lion and the skin of a rhinoceros, able to risk and withstand criticism in service of God's calling on our lives?

Today's words are political, spiritual, and trans-partisan. They challenge us to listen to God's voice in a challenging time. They challenge us to be light-bearers for just such a time as this, recognizing our complicity in social and economic injustice and ecological destruction, and then setting our feet on a higher and healthier path for the planet and its diverse and wondrous communities. Being light-bearers means actively

participating in bringing justice to all of God's creation.

**Amen.**

## PRAYERS FOR JANUARY 29, 2023

Creator God, we praise you and give thanks that your son, Jesus, became a person like us and shared our problems, anxieties, joys and happiness, and we give thanks that Jesus took our sins upon himself and gifted us with his righteousness.

And we thank You, O God, for Your Holy Word, which says: “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.”**

Dear God, we pray for those who peacefully protest in support of Women’s rights; we pray for the Afghanis affected by the ban on female aid workers, which has led to terrible deprivation and starvation. We pray for all those around the world who are poor in spirit, that You would lift their spirits by the good news of Your love and by those who show Your love by what they say and do.

**Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”**

Dear God, we pray for the families of those who have been killed while trying to evacuate people trapped on the Ukraine/Russia front line. We pray for the families and friends of those anxiously waiting for news of loved ones who are crossing borders as they flee from oppression by people who deny them their human rights, and who are intolerant of their sexual identity or choice of religion.

Today we remember and mourn for the children of Israel who lost their lives in the Holocaust. Let their courage be an inspiration to us as we work for justice and righteousness in our time.

**Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.**

Dear God, we mourn the damage to Your creation by proud and greedy people who cause climate change, from Afghanistan, to North Korea and Japan; from California to Texas and Nova Scotia; and from the polluted River

Drina on the boundary between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. We pray that these people may have a change of heart, and choose long-term benefits above short-term benefits. We pray especially for the country of Germany which is choosing to go back to lignite coal mining as a source of energy in these troubled times. We give thanks for the work of ethical scientists on the shores of the Baltic Sea, who are using algal blooms and seaweed as a replacement for plastics. Inspire us all to be more careful in protecting the air, the water, and the beautiful earth You created for us.

**Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”**

Dear God, we are sad at the news that the Moscow Helsinki Group, the oldest human rights group in Russia, has been ordered to close, and we pray that Russian leaders may have a change of heart. We pray for the success of all organizations who working the change their corrupt governments in many countries. We pray that the hearts of all people may be moved by Your love, O God – moved to show love to one another and to follow Christ in righteousness, generosity and peace.

**Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”**

We give You praise, O God, for those who are working for reconciliation with indigenous peoples in their countries, especially in those in Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Canada.

We pray for people in our lives and those unknown to us who need healing, care and compassion. We pray for the hungry, those without homes, refugees, and people asking for mercy. Help us to respond with generosity of spirit and resources.

**Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”**

Dear God, we read in the book of Genesis that You created all things and called them “good”, but human beings You called “very good”. Help us to see the goodness in people, no matter how different they appear in our eyes. Bless the lives, loves, and gifts of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and all gender non-conforming persons. Bless the lives, loves, and

gifts of Black and Brown people, and Native people who used to be called “redskins”, as well as differently-abled people and migrants and all those who are judged as inferior by the majority. Help us, O God, to look at these people through Jesus’ eyes, which were the eyes of Your love, for all persons, no matter how different.

**Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”**

Dear God, we pray for the success of those who venture into war zones with an offer of peace and to bring antagonists to talk. We pray for a change of heart and spirit among those who turn protests into an act of rebellion and war against government.

We pray for energy and strength of spirit in those people who work to make our neighbourhoods safer and more peaceful, who listen to grievances before they become violent, and who try to understand and to set an example of peace and tranquility and patience.

**Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

We pray for all those who are persecuted because they are standing up and defending people who are considered last, least and lowest.

O God, we pray for all those who have been persecuted or ostracized or rejected for standing up for the truth, the good, the right, and the just.

**Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavour? You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden.”**

Dear God, help us to be calm and caring and sensitive to as we seek to share our faith with others, as we share the story of your love. You are the true light. Help us to be genuine reflectors of your light.

Holy God, shine your light on us as a congregation; give us wisdom and guidance in the decisions we will be making this coming year. Grant us

discernment, so that what we do will be good not just for ourselves as individuals, but also for our congregation and neighbourhood and our whole Synod.

Hear all of these prayers, O God, and answer them according to Your great love and mercy, and in the way You know is best for us.

**Amen.**