

February 2, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: Beatitudes | [Matthew 5:1–12](#)

TITLE: How We Hear Things

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

Sometimes it's hard to really *hear* things we've heard many times before. A familiar song comes on the radio and we know it so well we don't pay attention to the words. We settle into the familiar cadence to *The Night Before Christmas* and feel the warmth of Christmases gone by, but we no longer hear the details of the story. We even recite the Pledge of Allegiance or the Lord's Prayer with comfort and ease, but the words are so familiar to us that they come out automatically and we don't even need to listen to the words we're saying.

The passage we heard today is like this in many ways. **Familiar. Poetic. Sure.** We have heard this list before of those called "blessed": the meek, the peacemakers, the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for justice... We know that there is a blessing for those called "blessed"—the kingdom of heaven, satisfaction, being named a child of God. We see the poetic structure of the scales balancing virtue on one side with Divine Reward on the other.

The words of our passage are a comfortable part of our tradition. They open the Sermon on the Mount, so we know they are important. But how are we to hear them? I don't know about you, but I find that I fall into two categories when I read them.

First, I can't help but scan the list of Beatitudes to see if I can find myself among the blessed. I wonder if I hunger and thirst for justice enough to find favor with God. I wonder if my grief counts as mourning and if I can be assured of joy. I want to trust that I am blessed—that I'm held by God, that I've found God's favor. Then I realize that my impulse might be a bit selfish, and perhaps I've missed the point. I need to start again.

Ok. So then I try to approach the text with some *humility*. Rather than trying to find myself in what is there, I look at it from a more aspirational perspective. Instead of looking for myself in the text *now*, I wonder what I can do better so that I might be assured of God's blessing. So I ask: What should be my next steps toward being a peacemaker? How can I cultivate my yearning for justice? What do I need to change within myself so that I might approach the world with more meekness and mercy? Then I realize I'm starting to wander down a path of **works righteousness** and see I've missed the point again. While it is a good thing to ask how I might cultivate peace and mercy, I shouldn't do it because I think that divine reward depends on it. I am not responsible for my own salvation. Our salvation has been won for us by Christ, through grace.

So then I realize that my problem is that I'm trying to make this all about me in the first place. What is Jesus saying here? To whom is he speaking?

Commentators help unpack this a bit. We learn that in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is painted as the "new Moses." So we recognize that Jesus' teachings atop a mountain carry all of the authority of the Law given to Moses atop Mt. Sinai. We see, as one commentator points out, that Matthew's Beatitudes quote Isaiah 61 and its message of liberation from oppression, captivity and suffering. We notice the artistry of Matthew's choices as the author of this Gospel loads these 12 verses with relevance and a suggestion that Jesus is the one who has come to fulfill the law and the words of the prophets.

And then another commentator reminds us that the words in Matthew's gospel are **indicative rather than imperative**. What does that mean? Jesus is not telling the crowds HOW they should be. He's not issuing commands. Rather, Jesus is pointing out who has already received God's blessing. The list is a surprising one, for our day as for back then. And another commentator reminds us: "Beatitudes are spoken to those groups whom God deems worthy, not by virtue of their own achievements or status in society, but because God chooses to be in the side of the weak, the forgotten, the despised, the justice seekers, the peace makers and those persecuted because of their beliefs."¹

It's no wonder it takes a while to come to this conclusion, even though it does sound like something Jesus would do! The Beatitudes of our world sound more like: blessed are they with matching 401(k) plans, for their retirement is secure; blessed are they who have comprehensive medical insurance, for they can see the doctor of their choice. Blessed are they who can afford a college education, for the job market is open to them. Blessed are they who are straight, cis, white and male, for their privilege is secure.

We count as blessed those whose material wealth or privileged status secures their well-being in the world. We count as blessed those who can retain power, safety, and even wealth in even when the world is filled with pain. We count as blessed those who have escaped the margins—not by an inch but a mile, and desire ourselves to be so blessed.

We count as blessed those who are **centered** in society—but this passage reminds us that God's blessing originates at the margins. In Christ, God's blessing begins with those who society has forgotten. God blesses the outcast. God blesses those who go against the grain. God blesses those who don't fit in.

In Christ, God even blesses those parts of us that we try to hide—the parts that make us vulnerable, the parts that bring us shame, the parts that are too painful to recount, the parts that we've worked so hard to overcome, the parts that just aren't fair.

The Beatitudes invite us to take a look at the world around us—and even ourselves—from a different perspective. These 12 verses invite us to see the holiness in the world just because it is made by God. As Barbara Brown Taylor says: "Because God made

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1 p 312

these things they share in God's own holiness, whether or not they meet (our) minimum requirements for a blessing."²

These Beatitudes change us. These blessings reorient us. They unsettle us and stretch us and show us that God is found in surprising places—even in the doubts we try to hide in our own hearts. The Beatitudes remind us that God's ways do not always reflect what we've come to see as normal or accepted in this world. In our world that is bent on divides—where partisan politics mean more than justice; where skin color still impacts ones rate of pay; where societal constructions around gender define people and somehow even colors—God's love reaches far and wide.

Atop that mountain Jesus called those whose names we will never know "blessed." He called those who were left out, alone or better off forgotten, "blessed." He called those battling addiction and those with mental illness "blessed". He called those with debt and doubts and distress in all forms "blessed."

Or, as Nadia Bolz-Weber says:

Maybe the sermon on the mount is all about Jesus' seemingly lavish blessing of the world around him especially that which society doesn't seem to have much time for, people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance. So maybe Jesus is actually just blessing people, especially the people who never seem to receive blessings otherwise. I mean, doesn't that *sound* like something Jesus would do? Extravagantly throw around blessings as if they grow on trees?

See, I like to imagine Jesus here blessing us because I believe that this is our Lord. Maybe the first time he blessed all the things we try and hide or make up for, or the things we insult in ourselves and others wasn't in the Beatitudes, maybe it was in his life. Because after all, it was Jesus who had all the powers of the universe at his disposal but who did not consider his equality with God and something to be exploited, but instead came to us in the most vulnerable of ways—as a powerless, flesh and blood newborn. As though to say, you my hate your bodies, but I am blessing all human flesh. You may admire strength and might, but I am blessing all human weakness. You may seek power, but I am blessing all human vulnerability. This Jesus whom we follow cried at the tomb of his friend, and turned the other cheek and forgave those who hung him on a cross. (Jesus) was God's Beatitude—God's blessing to the weak in a world that only admires the strong.³

Theologian and pastor Jill Duffield, recounts a story in her weekly devotional in which she shares a story she heard on NPR's Fresh Air in an interview with Brian Stevenson.

² An Altar in the World – p 203

³ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/11/some-modern-beatitudes-a-sermon-for-all-saints-sunday/>

Stevenson told of a story of a woman participating a project—a project called the National Memorial for Peace and Justice—a memorial that contains dirt from the site of lynchings. A woman at one of these sites digging this dirt with a trowel.

A white man in a truck slowed down and looked at her. He drove past, turned around and stopped. He asked her what she was doing. She said she felt compelled to tell him the truth, despite her fear. He got out of the truck and asked if he could help her. She offered him the trowel. He declined and dug with his hands. Together they put the dirt in the jar. She noticed tears streaming down his face and she asked if he was OK. He said he feared his ancestors may have participated in the very lynching she was memorializing. She cried with him. They took pictures of each other, holding the jar, memorializing a moment of unexpected understanding, hope and reconciliation. A moment of blessed mourning, mercy, hunger and thirst for righteousness that came as a result of two people, each in their own way and time, in their ordinary lives, haltingly trying to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with their God.⁴

Blessed are you, beloved children of God. Hear this assurance.

Hear this especially if anyone has tried to tell you otherwise—if anyone has told you that you don't amount to much or that you don't belong or will never fit in. Hear this if anyone has challenged your identity or worth or spoken lies about your worth.

But then hear this. We are not just blessed so that we might feel good and be able to fall asleep at night. We are blessed so that we can go out into the world and recognize the blessedness in others: the blessedness of those who have been outcast and shut down; the blessedness of those who have been put to the margins; the blessedness of those who are meek and who hunger and thirst for justice; the blessedness of those who dare to tell the truth in an age in which lies are uplifted.

Know that you are blessed. But go forth into the world today to remind others that they too are a beloved child of God, that God's blessing reaches wide and calls those from the outside in; that those who are struggling are not alone in their pain, that those who have been put down—that they matter too.

Be blessings, blessed ones. This world needs the change that, by God's grace, we can bring. May it be so.

⁴ Duffield, Jill; *Presbyterian Outlook*: Looking into the lectionary - Blessed are ...