

Matthew 5: 1-12 "Blessed" Rev. Janet Chapman 2/2/20

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a great story about a bright young man who was a sophomore Stanford pre-med student. To reward him for having done so well in school, his parents gave him a trip to Asia for the summer. While there he met a guru who asked him, "Don't you see how you are poisoning your soul with this success-oriented way of life? Your idea of happiness is to stay up all night studying for an exam so you can get a better grade than your best friend. Your idea of a good marriage is not to find the woman who will make you whole, but to win the girl that everyone else wants. That's not how people are supposed to live," the sage admonished. "Give it up. Come join us in an atmosphere where we all share and love each other." The young man had completed four years at a competitive high school to get into Stanford, plus two years of pre-med courses at the university. He was ripe for such an opportunity. He called his parents from Tokyo and told them he would not be coming home. He was dropping out of school to live in an ashram, a spiritual retreat center. Six months later, the parents got a letter from him. It said, "Dear Mom & Dad, I know you weren't happy with the decision I made, but I want to tell you how happy it has made me. For the first time in my life, I am at peace. Here there is no competing, no hustling, no trying to get ahead of anyone else. Here we are all equal and we all share. This way of life is so much in harmony with the inner essence of my soul that in only 6 months, I've become the number 2 disciple in the entire ashram...and I think I can be number one by June!" You can take the boy out of the rat race, but can you take the rat race out of the boy?

The familiar verses we heard from Matthew today are an overarching description of life in God's realm. The beatitudes are intended to help ordinary folks like you and I more fully embody living within a state of blessing, breaking free from the rat race and embracing a new

perspective on success. These echoes of Jesus' words have been translated and passed down over generations, whispered and shouted, copied and hidden as the lips of small children chant them, over and over, in the hopes of gaining a gold star in Sunday School. They are handed over from one language to the next as scholars debate the interpretation of each syllable. They can be found on elegant bookmarks, impressive wall hangings, or glowing stained-glass windows. In Vacation Bible School, I learned them as the "Bee- Attitudes" and in seminary Greek, I learned them as the Blessed are you's. Jesus shares them early on in his ministry, not long after calling his disciples to follow him. Each of the 9 beatitudes begins with the word "blessed" and some are fairly logical while others seem to contradict themselves. Dr. Ron Allen notes that it makes sense to say "blessed are the peacemakers" but not "blessed are those who mourn" because how is it that people are blessed when they are crying their hearts out?

"Blessed" is the key word here. The Bible Dictionary tells us that in the days of the Hebrew scriptures, the notion of blessing typically referred to fullness of life. To be blessed was to align with the purposes of God and often included material security, though not always, including a warm and dry house, nourishing food, clothing, land and family. Peace, joy, abundance. Shortly before the time of Matthew, some Jewish thinkers added a dimension to the idea of blessing. To be blessed was to be included in the realm of God. Like so many, Matthew believed that history was divided into 2 periods – the present age and the age to come. From that point of view, the present is an evil time disfigured by sin, hunger, demons, sickness, violence and death. The principalities and powers, primarily Caesar and the Roman Empire, had brutalized the world. But God would keep God's divine promises and destroy this age with a massive historical interruption – an apocalypse – and create a new world called the

realm of God or realm of heaven. This new realm is where everything takes place according to God's purposes – forgiveness, abundance, freedom, health, peace, and Life with a capital L: unending and eternal. To be blessed is to know you have a place in this realm. Matthew is inviting us to believe we have a place in this realm as we let loose of the old and present age and look forward to the age to come where everyone will live in peace, joy, love, and abundance. Recognizing one's place in this realm is what it means to be blessed.

That is at the heart of Jesus' words – so many do not know they have a place in this realm, too many are trying to earn their place or have disqualified themselves from blessedness from the very beginning. But this text invites us to think beyond ourselves, something which is harder for some of us than others. As Emily Kahm points out, Jesus didn't frame these verses to make them personal. In other words, "blessed are they who mourn" is not meant to be heard as "blessed am I when I mourn." Jesus was speaking to a large crowd; certainly some among them are mourning, thirsting for righteousness, or making peace, but he calls their attention away from themselves and towards who is missing. Where have the "they" gone that need to hear his words even more than us? His proclamation begs the question, "Who is it I know who is gentle and merciful and pure of heart, and do they even know they are especially blessed? Who is it that hungers and thirsts for righteousness, who sees how far we as a society have come and knows how far we have yet to go? Does she know that in God's realm, she is blessed, even if the world tells her otherwise? Theologians who take these words in partnership with Jesus' other actions and words point out that the "they" Jesus is referring to are the poor and persecuted, "they" are the ones who have been left out and labelled unacceptable. With this lens, we can see that we shouldn't be preoccupied with taking the beatitudes personally, that is

all about ourselves, but instead be watching for those people who, in spite of their struggles, have a special closeness with the Divine. Blessed are you, lonely widow who comes to church by herself every week. Blessed are you, mother of that noticeably squirmy preschooler and the baby who just discovered the fun of yelling in echo-y churches. Blessed are you, gentleman who looks like he's been doing hard physical labor before church and didn't have time to change clothes. And especially blessed are you, people who are so far away from my understanding and reality that I don't even know your daily struggles. Because God's blessings aren't just about me – they are about how I can bring blessing to your life.

Win and Joe Smith were missionaries in China in 1941. When the Japanese aggression threatened their safety, they moved to the Philippines. When the Japanese invaded, they imprisoned Win and Joe, their 5 year old son, and a large group of missionaries. The missionaries began to speculate how long they might be interned before their liberation. Some predicted one, others two, but Joe thought it would be three. His wife replied in horror, "We can't last 3 years living like this." Joe replied, "We don't have to live 3 years at once. We live one day at a time." That became their working philosophy for the more than 4 years they were in concentration camps. Joe recalls the experience as, "Doing what came to hand and taking advantage of every opportunity in the present." Living in limited space, conditions grew worse as the war went on. Often surrounded by barbed wire and segregated by gender, they had less and less to eat. Sometimes, they found weevils in their thin soup. Many of their missionary friends were brutalized when they were questioned and one was tortured to death. Yet they continued to "take advantage of every opportunity in the present" to love and support each other and express respect and concern for their captors as the situation allowed. Joe, for

instance, voluntarily learned how to bow in a traditional Japanese form of respectful greeting. After the war, someone in their group received a letter from the commandant of one of the camps saying that he had learned much from the way the prisoners lived together and with their captors. He was impressed with how 500 people were united together as if they had been members of one family. Having been recently imprisoned himself, he wrote that his guards conveyed he was a kind man, a gentle man during his imprisonment. If that was the case, he said, it was because he had learned it from Joe, Win and the others. Joe, Win and the other missionaries redefined what it meant to live a successful life.

Someone put it like this: "I spent my entire life frantically climbing the ladder of success. When I got to the top, I realized it was leaning against the wrong building." Blessed are you, who by your day to day living, embody the right perspectives for living within the realm of God here and now.