

**Pastor Mollie's Sermon**  
**February 2, 2020**  
**Matthew 5:1-12- Beatitudes**

We have here today a text that can be oh so familiar to most of us...

And this can be a good thing right? "Oh something I know..."

Or maybe it's not a good thing, since it can be so common,

These words could have the tendency to wash right over us...

Or maybe this is your first time hearing these "Blessed are the..." phrases

Regardless where you stand on this text....

I myself had to do some wrestling with this text,

because I've experienced firsthand the ways in which the beatitudes can be misread and misused.

So let's start there, by naming what the Beatitudes are NOT:

**The Beatitudes are not Hallmark greeting cards.**

It's easy in our consumerist culture to allow a word like "blessing" to become bland and meaningless. ("I am so #Blessed").

It's just as easy to equate "happiness" with material comfort and personal success.

But the Beatitudes are not Band-aids.

They're not meant to settle, soothe, and lull us to sleep;

they're meant to startle us awake.

Yes, they are pastoral, and yes, they can definitely give us hope.

But hope is not a sedative.

Hope is what gets us up and out the door.

**The Beatitudes are not to-do items.**

They are not suggestions, instructions, commandments, or *quid pro quos*.

There is nothing transactional about them,

nothing that smacks of a "should," a "must," or an "ought."

It is emphatically *not* the case that if I try very hard to be poorer, sadder, meeker, hungrier,

thirstier, purer, more peaceable, and more persecuted than I am right now,

God will like, love, reward, and appreciate me more than God already does.

**The Beatitudes are not pie-in-the-sky.** When Jesus promises his listeners the "kingdom of heaven,"

he is not asking them to grit their teeth and wait patiently for death to come along and alleviate whatever hell they're living in.

He is not handing out the afterlife as a fixer, as if our messy, earthly, ordinary lives here and now don't matter dearly.

To possess the kingdom, to experience comfort, to inherit the earth, to be filled, to receive mercy, to see God, to be called the children of God, and to receive a reward in heaven — these are not *just* about life after death.

They are about the kingdom that is already *and* not-yet, the realm of God that is present *and* coming, the reign of God's perfect justice and mercy that is within us *and* ahead of us. The promise is not an either-or. It's a both-and. The kingdom is coming. And the kingdom is now.

Okay, the Beatitudes are not these things. So what are they?

**The Beatitudes are blessings.**

I know this sounds like a restating of the obvious, but it's not.

In fact, it's something we forget over and over again.

The first words Jesus offers his commissioned disciples — the first words the Gospel of Matthew records from Jesus's inaugural sermon — are words of blessing.

Are we listening? Blessing comes *first*.

We *begin* with blessing.

Blessing, not judgment.

Blessing, not terms and conditions.

Jesus starts his ministry by telling the disciples who and what they already are: *they are blessed*.

Blessed, fortunate, privileged, favored.

Why? Because they are near and dear to God's heart.

Whatever else Jesus's first followers go on to learn or accomplish in the future is merely the outgrowth of what is *already* their ground-of-being, their identity, their solid-as-a-rock foundation.

God gifts their identities to them, without condition or measure.

They are freely blessed, and so they're freed to bless others.

What does this mean?

It means we're not God's nine-to-five employees, working for blessing as our compensation.

We don't endeavor to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly in order to *earn* God's blessings.

We do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly because we are always and already blessed.

I'll be honest — I'm not good at accepting blessings from others.

I tend to get cringy and anxious:

*If I accept this blessing, will God think I'm arrogant and presumptuous?*

*What right do I have to bask in blessing?*

*This* fear comes from a refusal to accept the core identity God has given me — and given all of us.

It's not a matter of our deserving; it's a matter of God's astonishing love and generosity.

Ours is an identity of blessedness. Can we accept that?

**The Beatitudes are reversals.**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes a universe turned on its head.

A world where the usual might-makes-right, survival-of-the-fittest hierarchies, rules, and priorities just plain don't apply.

In the kingdom Jesus describes, the poor are the wealthiest of all.

The mourners are the ones who receive comfort.

The starving sit at laden tables.  
Those who live meekly inherit everything.  
The peacemakers are God's children.  
And the victims of persecution win choice rewards.  
It's important not to read these stunning reversals through the screen of shame.  
Shame won't get us anywhere good.  
It's important instead to allow these reversals to provoke and instruct us, because they reveal essential truths about the nature of God.  
What Jesus bears witness to in the Beatitudes is God's unwavering proximity to pain, suffering, sorrow, and loss.  
God is nearest to those who are lowly, oppressed, unwanted, and broken.  
God isn't obsessed with the shiny and the impressive;  
God is too busy sticking close to what's messy, chaotic, unruly, and unattractive.  
This is important to remember, because the first thing I tend to ask when I'm hurting is, "Where is God?  
Why has God abandoned me?"  
The Beatitudes assure me that God doesn't exit my life when I find myself in low places.  
If anything, God is *most* present in the shadows.  
Most attentive in the fire.  
God faithfully accompanies those who go days, weeks, months, and years, hungry for a sign, a word, a crumb, a drop.  
Our hunger is not indicative of God's absence.  
Our hunger *is* the sign we seek. The blessing we chase resides *in* the darkness.  
And so the Beatitudes can challenge us to look carefully at our own life, and to consider where and how our privilege keeps us from seeking God.  
When things are going spectacularly well, do we feel much urgency about ultimate things?  
Not really. We can go for days without talking to God.  
It's very, very easy — embarrassingly easy — for all things deep and divine to become afterthoughts in our life,  
because God just isn't on our 24/7 radar when we're floating along on our own comforts.  
I think what Jesus is saying in the Beatitudes is that we have something to learn about discipleship that our privileged life circumstances will not teach us.  
If the Beatitudes have a "bite" to them, this is it.  
God is in the business of reversing just about everything the world values and worships.  
Things are about to change.  
Priorities are about to be reordered. Are we ready? Are we willing? Are we paying attention?  
**The Beatitudes are a vocation.** We make a grave mistake if we separate Jesus's words from his actions. We diminish him —and ultimately diminish ourselves — if we try to interpret his teachings through any filter other than the filter of his own life and ministry.  
Which is to say, Jesus acts.

He doesn't simply *speaks* blessing.

He lives it. He embodies it. He incarnates it.

Through his words, his hands, his feet, his life, he brings about the very blessings he promises.

This is the vocation we are called to. The work of the kingdom — the work of sharing the blessings we enjoy —

is not the work of a fuzzy, distant someday.

It is the work — and the joy — of the here and now.

*Blessed are you.* And you, and you, and you, and you.

Become what you are, give away what you seek, bless what God blesses, and turn this world on its head.