**Blessed Requirements**

February 2, 2020 Epiphany 4

Micah 6: 1-8 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Matthew 5: 1-12

“I am so blessed”. We maybe don’t hear this kind of phrase as much as we used to, but it is still said. What does it mean? Generally, it means, we feel really fortunate, happy, that we have what we need, that we feel loved. Sometimes the underlying message can be that others are not as blessed as I am, or if you don’t have the same as me, then you are not blessed. Maybe that is why one of the blessings in the Beatitudes of Matthew’s reading today is blessed are the meek or humble, for they will inherit the earth. To be blessed is to know that you are loved, accepted and that all is well or will be well.

In the Beatitudes of Matthew, Jesus turns upside down the situations of what one would consider a blessing. We don’t usually feel blessed if we are poor, mourning, hungry, or persecuted or reviled, insulted or abused. Yet these are some of the conditions Jesus lifts up as being blessed. In each of these situations the beatitude talks about a reversal of fortune. Where the world would think of people in these situations being filled with a sense of shame, God brings honour.

It is not actually the condition that is blessed, but the result or reason behind it. Mourners will be comforted, that is a blessing, a gift. The poor will receive the kingdom of God, the hungry will be filled. Those who are persecuted for seeking justice or righteousness, or for standing up for Jesus, for their faith, are blessed, for God is with us and there will be rewards. We are blessed when we connect ourselves to Jesus; when we are true and loyal to him; when our reputation is on account of him. Even in the face of persecution. Jesus is very aware of the oppression the people are living under in the empire of Roman occupation and through these blessings, offers them an alternative way of living. He is also laying out the way he will be living and carrying out his ministry. The blessing is that God loves us as we are in whatever condition we are in. Once we recognize and accept this, we can be faithful disciples.

The Old Testament lesson from Micah, connects us with this teaching. God does not require us to offer sacrifices or buy things to honour God, but to live faithfully, seeking justice, showing loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. These were not new principles but were grounded in Old Testament wisdom. The passage begins with God reminding the people of their liberation from slavery by God through Moses. It is also part of the poetic wisdom literature (for example psalms and proverbs) and the prophetic literature (prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah) that Jesus draws on for the Beatitudes :

“Happy are those who find wisdom and those who get understanding" ([Pr 3:13](http://ebible.com/query?utf=8%E2%9C%93&query=Pr%203%3A13&translation=ESV&redirect_iframe=http://www.patheos.com/ebible" \t "_blank)).

"Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Happy are those who keep God’s decrees, who seek God with their whole heart, who also do no wrong but walk in God’s ways" ([Ps 119:1](http://ebible.com/query?utf=8%E2%9C%93&query=Ps%20119%3A1&translation=ESV&redirect_iframe=http://www.patheos.com/ebible), [2](http://ebible.com/query?utf=8%E2%9C%93&query=Ps%20119%3A2&translation=ESV&redirect_iframe=http://www.patheos.com/ebible)).

"The righteous walk in integrity—happy are the children who follow them!" ([Pr 20:7](http://ebible.com/query?utf=8%E2%9C%93&query=Pr%2020%3A7&translation=ESV&redirect_iframe=http://www.patheos.com/ebible" \t "_blank))

There are strong parallels between the three requirements of covenant life that God names in Micah and what Jesus identifies as blessing in the beatitudes. The message in the gospel is “God is blessing such people and such ways of living now that God’s kingdom has drawn near.” The message in the prophet is “if it is blessing you seek, live these ways!” I wish to match three of the beatitude blessings with what is required of us in Micah:

Seek or do justice and blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Love Kindness and blessed are the merciful

Walk Humbly with God and Blessed are the meek.

We start with ‘do justice’ and the blessing of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Righteousness and justice are often synonymous in the Bible, they can often be used interchangeably. So, both are about living faithfully by seeking justice – right relationship and making things right for the poor and oppressed. In our craft/study group, we were reflecting on the idea from Jonathan Brooks, author of Church Forsaken, that the only way to practice presence in previously neglected neighbourhoods is to live in them, learn from them, love them and I asked the question, how do we practice presence in not so neglected neighbourhoods like ours? We talked about the importance of getting to know our neighbours, especially in areas that are not designed for getting to know your neighbours – it is so easy to go from car to home without going outside, especially in the winter, so that we don’t even see our neighbours. We talked about loneliness. I visited with someone this week who commented that there are a lot of lonely people out their, because as they shared their context of grief, they heard a lot of other stories, some by strangers, some by people who had not talked to anyone else about their grief or other issues. the craft/study group talked about how we can reach out to those who are lonely or who we may think are lonely, by talking with them, inviting them to community dinner, or church, or other gatherings, or creating space for community to form. When we work to build relationship, right relationship with others, in whatever context, we are seeking justice.

Next is love kindness and blessed are the merciful. Some Bibles translate this phrase in Micah as love mercy. Mercy is defined in Wikipedia as: benevolence, forgiveness, and kindness in a variety of ethical, religious, social, and legal contexts. So, love kindness is a good translation as well. Who do you know who shows loving kindness and mercy to those around them? As we continue with the work to address concerns and be open to the possibilities of having a dog park in our neighbouring space here, some of us are working to approach it with loving kindness. Our Leadership Team Chair, Sarah Tkachuk, wrote a letter to the leaders who have been interested in offering feedback and helping discern on behalf of the Living Spirit Centre. Here is some of what she wrote:

(I don’t necessarily speak for all at Eastside) but I am very much in favour of us supporting the dog park and making this work.  The city is responding to the citizens of the community, many of whom have been very vocal about asking for more dog parks in our community, and in the East end in particular.  Easy access to dog parks allows people to get outside, socialize with other dog owners, and greatly contributes to health and wellness in the community.  It allows people to gather together.  As a faith community, I believe that these are all things that we should be supporting.  I think that we need to thoughtfully consider the valid concerns around impact on the parking lot, roads and other assets, but the city has been very willing to work with us on that.  Ultimately, I believe that our goal should be to do what is best for the people in our community that we serve, whether they are regular attendees of the LSC or not.  …I personally believe that we need to work hard to make this work with the city.

For us to be open to welcoming people into our immediate neighbourhood through the dog park is about loving kindness, loving those and being open to providing space for those who come into or through our space. How do you show loving kindness to those you encounter in your neighbourhood or as you move through your day?

Finally, we have ‘walk humbly with God’ and blessed are the meek. Meek in Wikipedia is defined as righteous, humble, teachable, and patient under suffering. One perspective of walk humbly with God is that it could be translated as steadfastly or continually. That we walk always with our God. I think there is something to be said for doing so with humility or meekness. Who do you know that has steadfast faithfulness? Who shows up to live out their faith here and wherever they are? Who walks with God, shows a connection with God in all they do? I think of people who give so much to this community, that I see or am in communication with many times a week because of their commitment to their faith and as a result to Eastside. I see it in people who live out their faith in their day to day work lives or at school, in the support and love they offer to others, in being there to support someone in need. There are so many ways we walk with God and one another and when we do, we are blessed and a blessing.

Jesus reminds us that we are blessed, even when we are struggling or challenged or feeling persecuted. The blessing is that we are not alone. The blessing is that we live to create a better community, a loving community, where we know we are loved and show others what it is to be loved. This is the blessing. May we remember this, as we seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.