

**Matthew 5: 1-12 “See What Happens” Rev. Janet Chapman 2/1/26**

My family has fun at Christmas finding silly magnets and kitchen towels to give each other, you know the kind with funny sayings on them. This year, I found a kitchen towel that said, “And the wine whispered, ‘Say what you really think,’” in honor of those wine gatherings my middle sister has with her neighbors where they get into some heated arguments. Then there is the magnet that says, “Mr. Rogers didn’t adequately prepare me for my neighborhood” or “If you ever get caught sleeping at work, just slowly raise your head and say, ‘In Jesus name, Amen;’ works at church as well.” Then there are, “If at first you don’t succeed, then skydiving is definitely not for you,” “If you think no one cares if you’re alive, try missing a few payments,” and finally the image of 2 angels in heaven standing in front of a barn, lake and latrine, as one explains to the other, “We keep the holy cow in the barn, the holy mackerel in the lake, and you can guess what we keep in the latrine.” All of these either reflect the state of life as we know it or are subversive ideas for better living.

In Jesus’ day, they also had a wisdom genre which Israel’s sages and poets used to commend admirable but traditional actions and attitudes. They are found in the Psalms and Proverbs, including phrases like “pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (16:18) or “Where there is no vision, the people perish, but happy is the one who keeps the law.” (29:18). In today’s text, we are given more beatitudes to add to the collection which are meant to set the scene for Jesus’ teachings to come, called the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is laying a needed foundation if his disciples can’t get on board with, then there’s no point in listening to the rest of the sermon. Jesus gives his sermon on a mountain with just his chosen disciples. It wasn’t meant to be some great speech but a code of behavior that will shape the community of faith, so that it can call conventional wisdom into question, subvert the status quo, and then reshape all of society. Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to imagine what the disciples might have said in response. John says, “Should we be writing this down?” Andrew remarks, “Will this be on a quiz?” James asks, “Are we supposed to know this already?” Simon Peter complains, “You didn’t make the other

people learn this.” Philip says, “Hey slow down, I can’t find my pen.” Bartholomew pipes up. “How many points is this worth?” Thaddeus asks, “Would you repeat the third one again?” Matthew interjects, “I have to go to the bathroom.” Judas questions, “What does any of this have to do with real life?”... And Jesus wept.

Here at First Christian Church, we are a mixed group, a blend that church growth experts call the “Purple zone,” a mixture of the red conservatives and blue liberals, forgive the labels, who have committed to find our unity in Christ and his teachings, who believe that it is our diversity, not conformity, that equips us to handle life’s demands with better patience, grace, and compassion. We try to live by that vision Jesus had for the community of faith from the very beginning, with some days better than others. In today’s text, at least we don’t have to wonder what blessed life looks like. Jesus laid it out right from the start with his most famous sermon. Yet his description is so far from what some of us had hoped for, that like the disciples, we would rather discuss the teachings than act on them. How many points is this worth? Would you say the third one again? I have to go to the bathroom.

As stated, Jesus didn’t invent this very common literary form, but don’t be surprised if other beatitudes use the word “happy” in place of “blessed.” The Greek word, *makarios*, can mean both, as well as “blissful” or “fortunate.” The phrases are meant to be more descriptive; literally, it is like saying, “O, the blessedness of...” “O the blessedness of being poor in spirit, O the blessedness of being in mourning, O the blessedness of being meek,” and so on. The first part is an orientation of thought or action, with the second part being the subsequent state of life that results. For example, “O the blessedness of hungering and thirsting for righteousness” is an orientation of thought, it is a way of thinking, of hoping, of envisioning. Then the second section, “shall be satisfied,” is the result of such thought. However, we misunderstand these beatitudes if we think Jesus is saying we should go out and be poor in spirit, we should try to be in mourning, we should live in a state of passive resignation to present hardships. Jesus is saying if you are already in mourning, if you

are feeling poor in spirit, God provides gifts, blessings, to those who follow God with faith despite the present adversities you are facing.

So what does this have to do with real life? As a former copyeditor in an earlier life, I appreciated what Barbara Taylor says in response to this question. She had a copyeditor working on one of her books who was not a big churchgoer. This turned out to be very helpful since the copyeditor reminded Taylor how churchy her language had become. Beside the word “deacon” she wrote, “Please define.” Beside the word “sacrament,” she wrote, “Can you explain?” When Taylor wrote, “I don’t know anyone but Jesus who praised spiritual poverty,” she wrote, “If this is true, is there another way to phrase it? This sounds so negative.” Yes, it does. In this life, most of us pedal pretty hard to avoid going in the direction of Jesus’ Beatitudes. We read books that promise to enrich our spirits. We find all kinds of ways to quiet our grief, sedate our mournfulness. If there were a book called “How to Become More Meek?” who would consent to write the reviews? The minute you agreed to do so, you would appear arrogant, the opposite of meek. Except for the copy editor, everyone Taylor was acquainted with was so used to hearing about the Beatitudes, it was hard to imagine anyone who would be captured by their original shock value. If only there were a beatitude that said something like, “Blessed are you who suffer from late-stage cancer, for you shall be made whole,” or “Blessed are you whose prayers go unanswered, for you shall see God face-to-face.” Then there might be something to grab our attention. Like everyone else, we want the second half of the sentence, not the first. We want the comfort, the mercy, the intimacy with God. We want to be an inheritor of the earth and the divine realm as well. But if the only way to get to the second half of the sentence is to go through the first, then who in their right mind would do that?

It helps to remember that the Beatitudes are not moral instructions; the rest of Jesus’ sermon is filled with that, but not yet. At the beginning, Jesus isn’t telling anyone what to do, he is telling us how things really are. With each one, he connects present human realities with future divine realities in some unsettling ways. He tells

us how things work and then lets us decide whether we want to work with them or not. If we decide we don't, there's really no sense listening to the rest of the sermon, because everything that follows is going to be based on the tipsy worldview of the Beatitudes. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Those are the instructions. But before getting to the instructions, he starts with the words "Blessed are." "Blessed are the poor in spirit," because of what their poverty opens up in them in the here and now. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," not because God will fill them up later, but because their appetites are so fine-tuned right now. It isn't saying if you do this, then you will get this in the future. The blessings aren't deferred but are now for any who are willing to let God reveal them. This is what the Beatitudes have to do with real life. They describe a view of reality in which the least likely candidates are revealed to be fortunate in the divine scheme of things, in God's economy of life, not only later but right now. They are Jesus' truth claims for all time, the basis of everything that follows, which anyone who hears them is free to accept, reject or neglect. Whatever you believe about Jesus, believe this about yourself: the things that seem to be going the most wrong for you, may in fact turn out to be the things that are going the most right in the long run. It doesn't mean you don't try to fix them. It just means that they may need blessing as much as they need fixing, since the blessing is already present.

Just watch what happens, when we humbly depend on God's grace who makes us contributors to God's realm on earth. See what happens when we mourn, not just for our personal sorrows, but for all those who are subjected to injustice, and we are moved to do something about it. See what happens when we embrace meekness, not as passivity, but as proactive humility that is a key ingredient of leadership. Watch what happens when we hunger and thirst for right to prevail and put our actions behind our appetite for justice. See what happens when we embrace compassion and forgiveness, recognizing them as actions and not merely attitudes. See what happens when we ask God to purify us from all inward motivations that do not spring from God.

**See what happens when we work for peace amid people and communities in conflict. See what happens when we pray to have the heart of a lion and the skin of a rhino, able to risk and withstand criticism in service of God's calling on our lives. Each of these is far better than a kitchen towel or a magnet; they are like a glowing candle, waiting to light our path. May that divine light be revealed.**