

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany January 29, 2022

Matthew 5:1-12

So far in Matthew, Jesus has prepared for his ministry. He has been baptized, been tempted by Satan, called his first four disciples. He has taught in the synagogues, proclaimed the good news, and cured diseases and sickness.

Now, he turns to teaching his disciples with what is often called his first sermon.

The Gospel of Matthew consistently connects Jesus with Moses, pointing out a number of similar experiences and actions in their lives. Here on this mount, just as Moses did on Mt. Sinai, Jesus puts before the people God's vision for how we are to live with one another. The Sermon on the Mount, starting with what are called the beatitudes, and the Ten Commandments are not rules as much as visions of communal wholeness. Of what it means to live as the people of God, live in the reign of heaven.

Let's see what that looks like in the first part of Jesus' sermon.

Now, the Greek word that is often translated as blessed, makarios, is not the usual word for blessings (which are often associated with ritual blessings- things connected with worship). There are a number of commentators and translators who believe

that makarios relates more to the honor/shame ethic that was so strong in that time and place.

Now, honor, in that system of belief, is not simple self-esteem or pride; it is a status-claim which is affirmed by the community. Which is what many believe is happening here, because they are honored, then we respond as a community in this way.

So, let's look in a little more detail at these nine sayings. You can easily break them into two main sections of four sayings.

An expanded reading of the first section might be:

How honored are the hopeless poor, the despondent, who are materially bereft and worn down to the point of loss of hope. The poor in spirit are the ones who break their backs working, whose struggle for basic survival crushes their spirits. A spiritual as well as material poverty. Jesus says, they are in the kingdom now. Honor them. For the reign of heaven is theirs, now, because there are no poor in spirit there. This echoes Jesus' early teaching, repent, the reign of heaven has come near (3:2).

How honored are those who mourn, who find no cause for joy in their lives, who mourn not just the loss of a loved one, but of work, status, the basics of life, for they will be comforted (the promise of the psalms).

How honored are the meek, the gentle, those who are the doormats, the humiliated, who are abused by the wicked who only seem to prosper, who have not been given their share of this life- they will inherit the earth. They are the ones who will get in the end what has been denied to them.

How honored the ones who continually hunger for and thirst for righteousness. Here it could be that which they have been denied. They hunger and thirst for God's activity to bring vindication and justice. The righteousness of God which means equitable distribution of resources- so that (like manna and quail, in the wilderness) all might have enough. Those denied that, they will be filled, satiated, satisfied.

These first four sayings of Jesus' sermon speak of reversal of circumstances for those who are in want. They are not characteristics to be pursued, entrance requirements for the reign of heaven. Rather they describe the nature of reign of heaven. That for those for whom things have not been the way they ought to be, all this will change in God's reign. They are also a call for the community to respond to those in these circumstances in this way.

Which leads to the next section of four sayings.

How honored the merciful- the healers, who seek to put right what has gone wrong. Who strive to remove everything that prevents life from being what God intended: poverty, the isms- racism, sexism, hunger, disease... They will not only see mercy but receive it. Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew says mercy is more important than sacrifice. Mercy is worship of God.

How honored the pure in heart, who follow the will of God both in thinking and doing. In intent as well as outward action. Jesus will get into this later in his sermon. Not just the avoidance of impure thoughts, but the "single minded devotion to God" It's first commandment stuff. You shall have no other gods before me. Being pure in heart means not "parceling ourselves out to a number of loyalties." Serving a number of gods. These who devote themselves to God alone, they will perceive God, behold God- which is perhaps why they are pure in heart already.

How honored the peacemakers- the shalom makers, who work for the wholeness and well-being that God wills for a broken world. This shalom of God is different from the Pax Romana. Where peace meant subjecting other people to Roman dominion. A Pax imposed through force. One that was at best skin deep. Those who make the shalom of God they will be called what they are, children of God. In alignment with their Abba.

How honored the ones who have been persecuted on account of righteousness. Persecuted for pursuing what they, what others thirst for. The justice of God. They already have the reign of heaven. They exist there already, just like the hopeless poor.

These last four describe the ones who are ruled by God already. They show mercy and work to establish God's shalom. These are the ones committed to righteousness and if they are pure in heart they will not falter in the face of persecution. These in the latter part are the ones providing what people in the first part lack. And all are to be honored. And responded to by the community as such.

Then, the turn. Everything up to this point has been third person. Those people out there. They. But suddenly, Jesus turns and looks us in the face and says...

How honored are you when people revile and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Why would we be reviled and persecuted? Because, like Jesus, those who pursue righteousness may find themselves in the position of lacking it. Jesus proclaimed justice to those who were deprived of it and became one unjustly executed.

Jesus turns to us and says, do you embody this as my followers? Do you live this? Honored are you. We are not persecuted to physical death. But there is a cost, just as there was for Jesus and others who have embodied this call. But we endure that with the understanding that this is the way to life fuller and more abundant.

Finally- rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, and you have good company in the prophets who suffered the same fate. You are in the company of Peter, James, Paul, John, and so many nameless disciples persecuted because they dared to love like Jesus. To follow where Jesus leads.

The call of Jesus to his disciples seems to be: seek the well-being of others, and let God take care of you. One author said, "Perhaps this is the most Christian action one can undertake: Voluntary identification with the suffering." I'm with them.

Jesus is radically re-orienting his disciples to see people differently. To value things differently from the world. Things that would be deemed foolish by the world. Honor the poor? Honor the hopeless? Honor the humiliated and abused?

Yes, Jesus says. In fact, just by Jesus saying it he speaks it into reality. Honor has been conferred upon them, we as the community are called upon to act that way.

What does this mean for us?

A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. This world is suffering. Look around. A lot of people are suffering. God cares about suffering. And if we're the people of God, the body of Christ, guess what? We care for the suffering, even though it will cost us.

Keep in mind, that while death is a bad thing, to be resurrected you have to die first. To be reborn, you have to die first. To be truly transformed, something has to die first.

It's scary, and can be difficult, and we will mess it up. But its easier in community. When we pursue these things together. Love one another. Support one another. Practice on one another.

And we have the promise embodied in Jesus that God is with us. That God's love, mercy, and grace are sufficient for us. A love expressed in our being chosen in the waters of baptism. Our being fed with bread from heaven that is Jesus. Honored are we, who have Jesus as our Lord and who follow him alone.