

“A Real Blessing”
Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3;
Matthew 5:1-12

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The people began to go up the hill with Jesus. They knew that Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher. Probably some of them had some expectations about what they were going to hear. They had heard rabbis speak before. I wonder what kinds of things they expected Jesus to say, what they expected to hear from him. Perhaps they were expecting some kind of exhortation to encourage them to be better people. I wonder if they were thinking about how rabbis always told them to do or be something they felt was a little out of reach.

There are times where you go into something expecting one thing and hearing something else. I remember I went to a Bible study once when I was in graduate school the first time. I think I was a little too focused on being in graduate school, and I figured one of the folks in the group wasn't going to have much to say. I remember that so particularly because that person was the very person who ended up enlightening me in that passage, helping me see something I hadn't seen before.

Sometimes we encounter the unexpected in someone's words, and for me these words of Jesus, particularly as he sits before that crowd, are unexpected words. I have heard them lots of times. The Beatitudes are something that I've seen and heard over and over again. And yet, as I thought about Jesus sitting by that crowd and thought about what he was saying, there was something new, something different.

He was talking about blessing, and in some ways that's not new. People of faith always are thinking about blessing. I was thinking about the meaning of blessing again. I always look to the words to try to help me understand what's going on. The description that came out of looking at the Greek word was: one in an enviable position because they are receiving God's favor. Someone in an enviable position because they are receiving God's favor is blessed.

So as the people were sitting and began to hear Jesus talk about that idea of “blessed,” they knew he was going to talk about people in an enviable position because of God's favor. They were probably thinking he was going to tell them that if they could just be right with God, they would be wealthy and be able to have what they need. If you are just right with God, you'll have the right status. Or, if you're right with God you will have power. So, these first three blessings begin in ways that may have made them sit dumbfounded. Because Jesus didn't say, “Blessed are the wealthy.” Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

When you begin to talk about people who are poor in spirit, perhaps you are talking about the people who are poor in a social way, in a financial way, and are physically vulnerable. You are talking about people who are beaten down. How are those people the people who are blessed? Jesus says the people who are poor in spirit, the people

beaten down, are in an enviable position, for they are receiving God's favor. God's kingdom is available to them.

If we listen to Jesus, this may not be all that surprising if we really think about it, because in another place he also says it is as hard for the wealthy to get into heaven as it is for a camel to get through the eye of a needle. But as they went to hear this teacher, I'm not sure that is exactly what they expected to hear. The world around us seems to tell us that blessed are the wealthy, the powerful, the ones with great status.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, the beaten down. I don't know about you, but this year has felt like a year that has beaten all of us down a little bit. Maybe in feeling beaten down by this year, we can also open up and know that God's kingdom is near, available.

He goes on to say, "Blessed are those who mourn." Remember, mourning is to grieve over a personal hope or a relationship that dies. Too often, I think we think only of mourning about someone who has passed away, who has died. We live in a year where there is so much mourning, and it's not all because people have died. Yes, we have mourning over the people who have died because of the pandemic. We also have mourning over the changes and loss of normalcy. Mourning is about more than a relationship that dies. It can also be about a personal hope, a communal hope. One of my commentaries said, "It is the feeling that comes with social evil causing the demise of hope for shalom." People are longing for shalom, for the peace of God, for the grace of God to be seen in the world they live in. And Jesus said, "Blessed are you who mourn. You are in the enviable position of having God's favor, for you will be comforted." I looked at that word a little closer. It really means, "For you will be encouraged." Literally, it means to call from close by with advice. When we feel the loss, the struggle, the evil in the world, God promises God will come close and encourage and guide us as we open to him.

Blessed are the humble, those who care more about what is right than forcing others to give them what they want. The NRSV says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Meek is one of those old-fashioned words that has come to mean something like milk-toast. I don't think that is what it always meant. It meant simply that you didn't force your way, that you were able to recognize the needs of others and what was right more than your own needs and desires, and that you were able to step back and try to do what was right. So often it feels to me like our society tells us not to be meek, but to go after what we think we should have for ourselves, forgetting the idea of trying to go after what is right. Those who are humble, who care more about what is right than forcing others to give them what they want, are in the enviable position of receiving God's favor. And if we think about the crowd that was there, the ones who were trying to do what was right and yet were going into debt, the small farmers that were going into debt and having the rich use that debt as a way to take away their land. What does Jesus say? They will inherit the earth. They will inherit their place. They will have a place. As we look at this, Jesus was talking to this crowd and giving them

hope that blessing was already present with them, that God's favor was in their midst and for them.

As he goes on, he keeps talking about the blessings, the enviable position of being in God's favor for those who hunger and thirst for good, caring, healthy relationships, for righteousness. Those are the people who are in the enviable position of receiving God's favor, and they will be satisfied. So, as we hunger and thirst for those good relationships, God will honor that and satisfy it. Perhaps in a way this is realizing that God enters our lives in and through Jesus and offering us a valuable, grace-based relationship.

Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. The merciful, those who respond to the need of another with grace and goodness that helps the other. Not being those listening to social messages that tell one if I stop to help someone else it will impede my way to get where I want to go. Jesus is talking about caring for one another, responding to another with the grace and goodness that helps the other. Those are the ones in the enviable position of receiving God's favor, receiving the very goodness and grace of God. There is, in fact, something in that act of giving and caring for others that seems in itself to enable us to recognize grace and goodness, and yet our world so often tells us not to care too much. It will bog you down. It will impede your way.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the pure in heart, those whose thinking and feeling faculties are attuned to what pleases God. Thinking about becoming pure in heart as tuning ourselves to God's will is helpful. This one, for some reason, hit me this morning as it invites us to tune ourselves to God's will so that we will be in the enviable position of receiving God's favor, which is seeing God. I think that you have to get a little way into faith to begin to recognize what a wonder this gift is here—seeing God. I don't know that there's anything quite like it. To experience the wonder of who God is, the grace God gives us, an experience of one that is beyond all else. They will see God. I can't get there by attuning my life to the world's ways, but by attuning to what pleases God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. The peacemaker, the one trying to bring about what is necessary for meaningful human existence characterized by harmoniously working together toward the common good. This description Jesus gives to the crowd of the ones who are trying to be helpful to each other, who are encouraging ways of making each other's lives more meaningful, trying to work together to find how they can achieve a common good that creates some harmony are the enviable ones in a position to receive God's favor, for they shall show the character of God, that is, they shall be called the children of God. When we hear them being called the children of God, it is because they begin to show that character. People recognize it without knowing, even, what they believe because they have the character of God.

What we recognize at the very end, here, is that the world will not initially appreciate this, suggesting that blessedness is not about wealth, or status, or power. We come off of three or four weeks where we have read about the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, the chief priests, all the wealthy, the powerful, the ones with the greatest status coming and trying to trip Jesus up. Is it in part because what he's saying is God is already with the beaten down, those who care, those who are mourning, those who are not trying to put themselves forward, but are trying to do what is right even if it means that they are taken advantage of? The world may not like what Jesus is saying. Like I said at the beginning, I think Jesus surprised the crowd by telling them that they are in an enviable position, ready to receive God's favor. God blesses those in different situations and leading a different way of life than the world suggests.

Last week we talked about loving God and loving neighbor. It feels like here is Jesus talking about the blessedness of doing just that. Rather than worldly success and selfish acquisition of things and power, blessings come through caring for the way things go and the people around us. So Jesus again is inviting us to step out of the world and step into the kingdom of God.

It is in some ways the same thing at the table. We are invited to come and to recognize that what really feeds us, what satisfies our hunger and thirst, is the very gift God gives us, the grace God shows us, the way of life God invites us into, the community that we become as we gather around the table. It's a step away from our own ways of trying to make our own life work. It's a step away from thinking that we can be self-sustaining, and a step into grace, a step toward God's goodness, a step that invites us to remember that we are sustained by God's gifts, God's goodness. We are invited to step out of the world and into the kingdom of God. Amen.