

“Blessed”

Rev. Michelle Madsen-Bibeau

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Higganum Congregational Church

First Congregational Church of Haddam

Matthew 5:1-12

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Everyone has a different definition of blessedness, but Jesus’ definition is more different than most.

In my ministry I have been “blessed” to serve in rural, suburban, and city churches, as well as in two long term care facilities and a big city hospital.

I have spoken with new parents for whom “blessed” is getting four hours of sleep in a row or a load of laundry done, and to parents for whom “blessed” is if their teen with depression can get out of bed and shower.

I have celebrated with shoreline retirees “blessed” to christen a new sailboat, and have called a bingo game for Hartford seniors at a soup kitchen who were elated when they won prizes of single cans of peaches or soda.

I have heard folks give thanks for the blessing of jury duty pay and having jury duty canceled, and I have offered public prayers of joy for someone passing the bar, becoming a judge, and retiring from legal practice (not the same person, though if I stayed around one church long enough I presume it could be). I am friends with a former judge dealing with dementia who said he felt blessed to be part of a new drug study and that he has family to care for him.

I have listened to couples share their heartfelt sense of blessing for making it to the town office just in time to get their marriage license after almost forgetting, and for being first in line the morning their marriage could be recognized after decades of commitment.

On the other side, I have known families who were glad a wedding was called off, individuals who thanked God for good financial divorce settlements, and some who counted it “blessed” to be able to walk away from a relationship with nothing but their physical safety.

But no matter our own health or wealth or work or relationship status, or our direct experience, or not, with people with different lives than our own, it still is easier I think to understand any of these folks as “blessed” than to take in the full truth of what Jesus describes in the “Beatitudes.”

Blessed are those who mourn? Blessed are those released from long suffering, we can agree, but those who mourn them, those left behind?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness? Blessed are those who are persecuted? Blessed is the memory of prophets and martyrs, yes, but it feels almost obscene to call “blessed” those who are born in times and places where their lives must be poured out in struggle.

Jesus offers these ideas against which our minds rebel interspersed with sentences that we find easier to accept about future rewards, but taken all together and taken seriously these beloved and familiar words from the Sermon on the Mount really are challenging.

One preacher I read this week described how someone once criticized C. S. Lewis for “not caring for the Sermon on the Mount.” He replied, “As to ‘caring for’ the Sermon on the Mount, if ‘caring for’ here means ‘liking’ or enjoying, I suppose no one ‘cares for’ it. Who can like being knocked flat on his face by a sledge hammer? I can hardly imagine a more deadly spiritual condition than that of a man who can read that passage with tranquil pleasure.” [*God in the Dock*, pp. 181-82].

We are used to politicians and tv preachers who say they can make everything alright. Jesus comes promising not the satisfaction of heaven on earth, but citizenship somewhere else entirely. How is it, we wonder, that a Messiah who preached suffering, struggle and sacrifice somehow drew so many to follow him? What draws us to claim his name?

Maybe we don’t really listen. When it comes to the Beatitudes, I think we often just adapt what Jesus has said, distorting the meaning into something more palatable.

We agree the meek will inherit the earth, but we fail to take in what my legal friends could remind us, that this means the powerful are written out of the will, will receive nothing.

It sounds nice to us that the merciful and the peacemakers will be recipients of forgiveness and God’s welcome, but we don’t catch the implication that when we judge and extract our pound of flesh, or we reap our share of benefit from systems of domination we disqualify and exclude ourselves.

We say “hear hear” to the promise that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled, without grasping that our daily desperate efforts to fill ourselves with lesser things are chasing after the wind.

Luke’s version of what seems to have been a theme Jesus repeated time and again in his preaching lays it out more clearly by including “woes” alongside the blessings.

Luke 6:24-26

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

Jesus asks his followers to completely reorient our lives around priorities our friends and neighbors, and even our families may find at best naive and at worst treasonous. “Challenging,” indeed. We want happiness, satisfaction from good things, the kinds of blessings we can taste, touch, feel, and understand, not “blessedness.”

And that is no surprise to anyone, least of all to the God who made us with our appetites and needs, or to Jesus who walked among us as a human being- and as the Confirmands last week studied ate, drank, slept, grieved, and loved in perfectly human ways.

In the end Jesus’ teaching again shows our only hope is in God’s Grace in the midst of our hopelessly divided loyalties, and that despite our best intentions we cannot earn God’s Blessing by our own merit.

But that analysis, that true and orthodox insight, doesn’t explain the appeal of Jesus’ words. Why they were remembered and repeated, and written down, so that we could hear them this morning. Being reminded that we live so precariously isn’t the point of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

The point of Jesus’ sermon is that God cares for us, that we indeed are counted among the blessed not when all is well and all speak well of us, but:

When our spirits are bankrupt.
When we are ripped up by grief.
When we yearn for what is right.

Blessed to bless in turn, may we go forth even today to offer mercy, to share our hearts, and to continue Jesus’ work of making peace. Amen.