



4th Sunday after Epiphany
“Blessing”
Matthew 5:1-12

Prayer: Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Several years ago while teaching Sunday School at my former home congregation, it was time for the Sunday School Christmas program. One of my fifth grade students was insistent that he was not going to be part of the program. The more I tried to convince the student, the more the student refused to participate. Finally, I asked why the student was not willing to participate. With hands folded across his chest, he said, “It’s the same story every year!”

Today, it may seem as though we are sharing “the same story every year.” On Sunday, November 7th, 2010 as we celebrated All Saint’s Sunday, we heard Luke’s account of the Beatitudes. While the wording may be similar, the context, setting, and people differ greatly between Luke and Matthew. Among the differences are the number of disciples both Luke and Matthew list. Luke lists the disciples before Jesus speaks. Matthew states, ‘the disciples came to him’. At that time, Jesus only had four disciples: Andrew, Simon (Peter), James, and John. The others would be called later.

A second difference between the two accounts are the endings of the Beatitudes. Luke lists woes for those who are rich, full, or satisfied. Matthew lists his woes – and charges against the hypocrites closer to the end of his Gospel.

The context for Luke and Matthew is also different. Luke is writing to one person, Theophilus, in order that Theophilus might know the truth. Matthew, on the other hand, is writing to a new community – a community struggling both inside and outside with various concerns. Because of who each is written to, the “you” in the Beatitudes is different. For example, Luke’s “you” is a first person singular “you”. Matthew’s is a third person plural “you” – all of you, but more specifically, “the community”.

How Luke and Matthew understand Jesus is also different for both. For Luke, Jesus was one who identified with the poor. For Matthew, Jesus was the fulfiller – and the fulfillment of God’s promises found throughout the Old Testament. In this fulfillment, Matthew’s focus was the coming of the reign of God. This reign of God was not in a future, distant place. Rather, this reign of God is in the here and now – the present.

When Matthew writes about “you”, he is referring to the entire community rather than select individuals. In a community that had its share of tensions and struggles, Matthew provided assurance, confidence, and hope. With that assurance, confidence, and hope came the reminder of being part of the reign of God both in the present moment and in what is yet to come.

“Blessed” has often been interpreted as “happy”. Matthew is not referring to the entire community being happy all at once. Consider for a moment your own households earlier this week with the weather. There were some in the family who may have been happy that it snowed and school was cancelled for the day. Others might not have been pleased about having to go out and clean off the snow. The reality is, when we live in community, there will be those times where some of us might be more emotional than others. And there will be times when we might be more down in the dumps than others. If we wrestle with always being “happy” – what makes us think those in the early Church were any different than us?

In a world that struggled with Roman rule, their place in society, and suffering from robbery and wrongdoing, Matthew is reminding his audience – and us – of what is important in life. What ultimately is important in life is that of following God’s commands and walking with God.

Jesus’ words in the Beatitudes are not commands. They do not demand us to become poor, or meek, or hungry. Nor are they conditional: ‘IF you are poor, THEN you will be blessed.’ What the Beatitudes are is a call to be disciples in a way that seeks to be obedient and faithful to God, to walk in God’s ways, and to seek justice, righteousness, and mercy.

Understanding the Beatitudes and embracing them in life can leave us responding in one of two ways. On one hand, we can view them as a way of life that may seem to be attainable only by those who are saints. On the other hand, we can view them as still being relevant today. Perhaps in that relevancy, we need to hear them again. We need to hear them again in a way that reminds us that the reign of God here and now does indeed turn the world upside down.

If I were Matthew, I would offer the following as a twenty-first century rendition. Some of these are serious, some not so serious, but reflect, I think, the reality of God's presence within our lives turning our world upside down – in a way that makes sense only to God.

Blessed are those who shovel snow, for they shall see the beauty of God.

Blessed are those who ask for help, for their burdens will be lifted up.

Blessed are those who are selfless, for others will take what they receive.

Blessed are those who are lost, for they will eventually find their way.

Blessed are those who are patient, for they will be tolerant of others.

Blessed are those who celebrate diversity, for they will find unity.

Blessed are those who have nothing, for they will own much.

Blessed are those who speak out against the wrongs of this world, for their voices will be heard.

Blessed are those who are weary, for they shall find rest.

Blessed are those who cheer for the underdog, for one day, they will experience victory.

Blessed are those who hear "the same story every year", for one day, they will understand.

Blessed are those who understand the wisdom of the cross, for they will be foolish in the eyes of the rest of the world.