

Blessed Kingdom
Matthew 5:1-12
4th Sunday After Epiphany
Rev. Don Best
Bethel Presbyterian Church
West Union, IA
February 2, 2020

Gospel Reading

At the end of our reading last week, we heard: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom," and this week, we actually hear Jesus begin to teach. Our reading this week, is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. This is Matthew's longest solid block of Jesus' teachings. What we know as the Sermon on the Mount, encompasses chapters 5 through 7 of Matthew.

This morning we hear the Beatitudes, a series of sayings that declare blessings on certain groups of people. This type of saying is not unique to Jesus, Christianity, or even religion. But as you might guess, Jesus puts his own spin on this common form of wisdom statement. Listen now to Matthew, chapter 5, verses 1 through 12:

^{5:1} When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

In Matthew, the idea of Jesus as a teacher is very prominent. Jesus is a teacher before he is a healer. Earlier I noted that, after calling the first disciples, Jesus went about Galilee teaching and proclaiming the kingdom. As a result, great crowds began following him. At the end of chapter 7, the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew tells us that, "...the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." Jesus taught with an authority unlike what the people had seen before.

At the beginning of our reading, Jesus sees the crowd and goes up a mountain; his disciples came to him, and Jesus started teaching them. In this case, I believe we should understand the term disciples, not as the four men he called in chapter four, but the larger group of people following Jesus. Jesus begins with the Beatitudes. A beatitude is a proverb like saying that speaks a blessing to a person or a group of people. Beatitude comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word that beings each one of the sayings: makarios. Sometimes this is translated as "happy," but the better translation is "blessed." Specifically, blessed by God, or divinely favored.

In Matthew, Jesus names eight groups who are the recipients of this divine favor: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. I am not going to go into what each of these means, but, for the most part, they are pretty self-explanatory. Jesus was speaking to a first century audience of poor country folk, who lived under the oppressive arm of the Roman Empire, and what had become an elitists temple movement. These people were the poor, the meek, the hungry and thirsty. And in their world, they were anything but blessed. They were the opposite of blessed, they were oppressed. And if we are honest, if we look around the world today, we would have to say, "No Jesus, these people are not blessed!"

But, remember Jesus was teaching about the kingdom of God. If we look at the second part of each of these statements of Jesus, we see that is exactly what he is saying. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Each of the beatitudes offers a compensatory reward that shows why they are blessed. These people are divinely favored and will receive reward in the kingdom of God. But this is not a future blessing, the people are blessed now; they are favored now. In the Beatitudes, Jesus is teaching that things in the kingdom will be reversed from the way they are now. Just like Jesus is a different kind of king, a different type of Messiah, the kingdom that he

proclaims will be very different from the kingdom of this world. Then and now, the way things are in the world, is not the way it will be in the kingdom.

I need to make a few cautionary points. First, we should not think of this as a checklist for getting into heaven. Jesus did not say, "Blessed are you if you..." Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." We are not instructed to pick three off this list and strive to live accordingly, in order to receive God's favor. Again, the people Jesus was speaking to, were the people on this list. Jesus was speaking to them, proclaiming them to be blessed by God, and promising, that for them, things would be different in the kingdom.

Second, we must not think of the rewards as being strictly future rewards to be conferred on getting into heaven. This is not about the afterlife. This is about the kingdom of God. The reign of God, the present and the future coming of the kingdom. And we must not use these statements of Jesus to excuse any kind of oppression, or abusive situation, claiming that things will be better later on.

So, what should we do with this list? Certainly, if you fall into these categories, know that you are blessed by God; that you hold a special place in the heart of God, and you will hold a special place in the kingdom. But, the rest of us, the fortunate people in this world, what are we to do with this list? I have already said that this is not a list of goals for living. Yes, it is good to be merciful. Certainly, the world needs more peacemakers, and a little meekness never hurt anyone, but what else does this reading have for us?

Well, consider this. We know that Jesus was teaching about and proclaiming the kingdom of God. And, any time we talk about the kingdom, we need to remember the two aspects of the kingdom: the future and present. There is the eschatological nature of the kingdom. The kingdom will come at a future time. The kingdom of God will come to earth. "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." We pray, every time we worship, for the coming kingdom of God to be here on earth.

On the other hand, there is a very real presence of the kingdom, now with us and in us, and in the church. Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God is here. Jesus came to earth to initiate the present kingdom of God, and we, you and I and all Christians, are members of that kingdom. We are the kingdom. The Church of Jesus Christ is the kingdom of God. This means that we are called to be the opposite of the kingdom of this world, we are to be the kingdom of God in the world, and to the world.

That means, as I see it, that we are called to be a blessing to the poor in spirit. We are called to be a comfort to those who mourn; to bring about the earthly inheritance to the meek; to fill the hungry and thirsty; give mercy to the merciful, to show God to the pure in heart, and proclaim that the peacemakers are the children of God, and to bring the kingdom to the persecuted.

We are the kingdom of God in the world, and we are to teach the kingdom, to proclaim the kingdom and to bring the kingdom of God to all God's children, to all of creation.

Let us pray:

Holy God, you sent your Son to show and teach us about your kingdom. We hear your word read and proclaimed and learn how your kingdom is and will be different from the kingdoms of this world. As you bless the oppressed and suffering people of the world, show us ways to be a blessing to them as well. Guide us to be your kingdom, take your kingdom to the world, and to proclaim your reign; on earth as it is in heaven.

AMEN.