

Matthew 5:1-12 (CEB)

5 ¹ Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. ² He taught them, saying:

³ “Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

⁴ “Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

⁵ “Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

⁷ “Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

⁹ “Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children.

¹⁰ “Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

¹¹ “Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. ¹² Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

“True Happiness”

“Do you know why I want to join the church?” asked the father in his thirties. He was holding an infant on one shoulder and had a red Lands End diaper bag slung over the other shoulder. His wife stood next to him in the church narthex, holding the hand of a cranky two-year-old with a runny nose. The father said, “We began to worry about raising our children. There are too many opinions about what is right, too many temptations, too many possible wrong turns. We want our kids to learn some positive values, and the church seemed like a place where they can learn them. We want to join the church because the church is one place that teaches good values.” Most of us can understand this family’s concern. So let’s see how today’s text addresses this.

Well, for all those who ever considered seizing the opportunity to preach, let me ask a question: How does one preach a sermon about a sermon? That is what Deacon Bonnie and I will be attempting to do during this month when our Gospel texts include portions of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from the book of Matthew!

We begin with chapter five, as Jesus and his newly called, wide-eyed disciples are beginning their journeys healing the sick and proclaiming the good news. A crowd has begun to follow Jesus, out of curiosity, in hope, when the rest of life was desperate. And Jesus goes up the mountain, and sits down to preach as the disciples and others gathered. In this long discourse, we hear for the first time Jesus' own teachings to comfort and challenge his hearers. This sermon was offered for the desperate of Jesus' day, and for our time as well.

The Beatitudes are one of the most familiar passages and yet their challenge to us never gets old. We are called to engage with these Beatitudes in any given moment of life. Now, the Greek word that's translated here as "happy," can also be translated as "blessed," as we have heard in other translations. The basic point is that these are some of the keys to living the good life in faith in Jesus.

"Happy are people who are hopeless / Blessed are the poor in spirit / You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope..." At the start, that doesn't sound much like GOOD news . . . until . . . Jesus adds, *"For the kingdom of heaven is theirs / With less of you there is more of God and God's rule."* If we follow the way of Jesus, we **live** the realm of God into reality. We erase the margins of society, to which we exile some people of the world. When we are truly followers of Jesus, we move people from the margins to the center, so that together we all share in the abundance of community! If we are to take the message of the Gospel seriously, then we create a world where the most powerful and the least powerful among us are brought into the fullness of our world!

"Happy are people who grieve / Blessed are those who mourn / You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you . . ." In a community of love and companionship, all will be comforted. Yes, there will be mourning, grief, sadness, even suffering. But no one grieves alone. God tenderly embraces us, and the faith community journeys beside us.

“Happy are people who are humble / Blessed are the meek / You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are...” With this self-image, believers let God work through us, bearing witness to the goodness of heaven here on earth.

“Happy are the people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness because they will be fed until they are full. / You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. God is food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.” My New Testament professor thought the word “righteousness” should have been translated “justice.” Are we hungering for God’s form of justice in our world?

“Happy are people who show mercy, for they will receive mercy. / You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full’ you find yourself cared for.” This is every day, Christ-like, relational ministry. In caring for others, and extending mercy, we strive for a world in which all will be merciful, and all will be cared for.

Happy are the people who have pure hearts, for they will see God. / You’re blessed when you get your inside world -- your mind and your heart -- put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.” God is with us and loving us all the time. The question is whether we live in such a way as to see God and hear God’s call on our lives. To be pure in heart is to live with a sense of integrity. There is corruption all around us. There is manipulation of power all around us. There are questionable motives and mean people and moral ambiguity at every turn. But Jesus came to remind us that God is more loving, more powerful, more gracious, and more true than the ways of this world. Jesus is consistent in his witness for God’s love and justice, and calls us to that witness also.

Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children. / You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.” Peacemaking is work. Peace is not passive. Peace is not false unity that silences oppression or opposition. Peace does not mask injustice and allow it to fester. Peacemaking is hard, daily, active work. It is the duty of people who claim to be Christian.

“Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me.” Jesus says. / *“What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are*

uncomfortable.” Jesus knew well that the quest for genuine justice does not make one popular in many social circles. When one stands for the innate value of all people and the planet, some will be upset. When we say that the physically disabled and the Muslims, the mentally ill and the Guatamalan immigrants, the homeless and the Syrian refugees, the folks with different colors of skin, the transgendered, the impoverished, the queer folk and the vulnerable natural ecosystems -- when we say that all of these are precious and fully worthy in the sight of God, there are people with power and privilege in this world who will not want to hear it. ***Because if that is true, then we as a global community are called to live a very different way.***

“Rejoice and be glad,” Jesus tells them and us, “My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.” This is not going to be an easy road. Jesus knew what was coming. His followers should not expect success by the measures of this world. In fact, there will be days when we don’t seem to make anyone happy. Living out the love of the gospel is a huge challenge. It is a call to live differently, to love extravagantly, to care deeply, to pray without ceasing, to tend to the needs of our neighbors, to see everyone as our neighbors, to find the face of Jesus in the marginalized, and to work to change the systems that put people and the planet at the margins. These are the values the church is trying to teach and to model.

We may not see the rewards of this life while on earth. But if we live as a peacemaker, if we seek justice, if we live with integrity, if we are humble and merciful, we are living the life God calls us to live.

Rejoice and be glad for great will be your reward in heaven.