

4th Sunday after Epiphany February 02 2020

Matthew 5:1-12

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you blessed of the Lord, from Father God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. *'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..." and "Rejoice and be glad..."'* Let's pray:

Throughout our world, the Church, and our homes the same question is being asked. People desperately want to know if the waters of life are navigable and, if so, how. People are looking for a way to deal with the challenges, the uncertainties, and the difficulties of life. We all want some assurance that the direction of our life will offer meaning and connect us to something larger than our individual stories. So how do we move forward? What are we to teach and tell our children, grandchildren, great grandchildren? Those are the age-old questions, asked in every generation.

We struggle to understand the modern world; the one that has made what once seemed sensible to us, obscure. You can watch attempts at those questions being answered on the news as people from Hong Kong, Iran, and Lebanon confront their governments, struggling with different ideas and directions of how life should move forward. I see those questions often enough in the pleading eyes of the homeless, especially in the city where so many who pass them by, have wealth unimaginable, while they beg each day for their daily bread.

Most often, our attempts to navigate life don't make the news. Yet, regardless of whether they're personal struggles or family matters, they're just as real and of equal concern to God. Each of us ask questions, confront challenges, and face difficulties we must overcome. Sometimes we seem to succeed and other times we don't.

Most of us have been taught to navigate the waters of life through power, strength, accomplishment, and acquisition. We work to be rich so we can have what we want. We seek power so we can take what we want. We argue to be right so we can live on our own terms. We compete to win so we'll be respected and admired. We want to be beautiful so we'll be liked and desired.

Those attitudes fill headline news, magazine articles, television, social media, and filter into our own lives. They find their origin in the idea that we're to be self-made people, that we're to build up ourselves and make a life. We must look out for number one because if we don't, no one will. At least that's the ideology being pushed onto us. For too long that's been the myth we've had to live with. Jesus' life and teaching fly in the face of that myth. Jesus offers a different way of navigating life.

The waters of life, he says, are navigable. But it's not through power, strength, accomplishment, or acquisition. The way forward is not the way we've always done it. It's not enough for us, as believers and followers of Jesus, to simply do a make-over on a little piece of our world or life. It's not enough to just reform a political or economic system. Navigating life isn't about overcoming situations or other people. It's about overcoming ourselves.

If you want to know what overcoming yourself looks like then look at the beatitudes:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit.
- Blessed are those who mourn.
- Blessed are the meek.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
- Blessed are the merciful.
- Blessed are the pure in heart.
- Blessed are the peacemakers.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.
- Blessed are you when people revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on [account of Jesus].

That's how we navigate life. That's how we meet the challenges, the uncertainties, and the difficulties of life. That's what we're to teach our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. A lifetime of living the beatitudes, being blessed by God, day after day, year after year, is how we overcome ourselves.

The beatitudes are not simply Jesus' helpful hints for happy living. They're not the church's version of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* or *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. They're descriptive of God's mind and Jesus' heart. They reveal what kingdom life is like. They shape and form our lives and longings to be like God's life and longings. That's a very different approach. Most of the time we twist and distort God's life and longings to fit ours. That's why the beatitudes are so radical and often seem so out of reach.

As we hear Jesus' words and consider the beatitudes it's easy to look at ourselves and say, "That's not me, that's not the world, that's not even the Church." We tend to look at what we're not. Sadly, Christians can at times, dwell too much on negatives, rather than proclaiming God's gospel love. Shane Claiborne captures this best when he quips, "Somehow we've become known more for what we're against than what we're for. More for who we've excluded than who we've embraced"

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaOzKDRF0D4&t=710s> accessed 28/01/2020]. God, however, focuses on what we can become, who we are called to be.

The temptation is to think that the beatitudes are rules or conditions for being blessed or receiving our heavenly reward. They're not that at all. They're not about building up, accomplishing, or acquiring. Nor are they the Ten Commandments revitalised as some Christians think. The beatitudes are about letting go, surrendering, living with a vulnerable and open heart. That doesn't mean we run away, back down, or isolate ourselves from the realities of our life and world. It means we engage them in a different way, Jesus' way. The

beatitudes teach us to trust God more than the external circumstances of our lives. They invite dependence on God rather than self-reliance.

That sounds a lot like weakness and foolishness. That's what it sounds like in every age. But to those who are being saved it is the power of God. God chose what is foolish to shame the wise and what is weak to shame the strong. The beatitudes are nothing less than the way of the cross. The fullest expression of a "beatitudinal life" is seen in Jesus' crucifixion. If we live the beatitudes, they will take us to the cross.

In the trauma and setbacks of life we discover that we can't do life by ourselves. As we admit our need for God, we find purity of heart. The arrogance of self-sufficiency gives way to meekness. We realise that all we are and have is from God and we begin to know ourselves as poor in spirit. Our own misfortunes awaken and connect us to the pain of the world for which we can't help but mourn. We think less about ourselves and become merciful to others. We have nowhere else to go and so we turn our gaze back to the cross. The longer we gaze at the cross, the more we hunger and thirst for righteousness, for God's life, and we become peacemakers reconciling ourselves to God and our neighbour. This is the life for which Christ's disciples are willing to be persecuted, a life of righteousness, the life for which Christ died and rose again.

The beatitudes are not so much about what we do - our actions, but how we do - our being. They're less about actions and more about relationships. To live the beatitudes is to live a life of reckless, exuberant, self-abandonment to God and our neighbour. That's called love. The only reason we can do that is because we know and trust ourselves to have already been blessed by God. We live the beatitudes as a response to God blessing us. That is the way of Christ. That is not only the way forward through this life, it is the way to life.

Blessed are you saints who are poor in spirit, the kingdom of heaven awaits; you who mourn, comfort is assured; you who are meek, the world is your oyster; you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, are always being filled; you who are merciful, receive great mercy; you who are pure in heart, see God who dwells there; you who are peacemakers, are children of God; you who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, also the kingdom of heaven; and blessed are you when people revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on [account of Jesus], your reward in heaven is multitudinous. Blessed are you the unwise, humble, weak, foolish, low and despised, who shame the wise and the strong in the world by boasting only in God, the source of your life in Christ Jesus. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

