

“Blessed”
Matthew 5:1-12

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If you were someone who watched the Lectionary, you would probably realize that this passage was not the one picked for today. In the Lectionary readings for this season, we keep hearing about Jesus’ appearances to the disciples. Perhaps it’s a way of adjusting to the new reality. I thought that this year there might be another way of thinking about the new reality Christ brings to us through the resurrection. Not only by seeing the reaction of disciples, but of hearing Jesus’ words and to see what he said about what the Kingdom looks like, the Kingdom that’s coming soon. So, I am going to begin with what is called the Sermon on the Mount today, with probably one of the most famous parts of that sermon called the Beatitudes. It’s interesting to note as we begin to talk about this particular set of scriptures, I don’t think it’s often preached on. Perhaps it’s because of the nature of it. It’s a little difficult, partly because each line could be a sermon in itself. We are going to read all of the Beatitudes this morning and try to put them together a little bit and not go too much line by line. We are going to begin to see what Jesus says about living into this new reality: the resurrection. Listen for the word of God in Matthew 5, verses 1 through 12.

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This is the week after Easter. Sometimes it’s hard to think about the week after. We build up to the week, build up to that particular day, the joy and wonder of it, the grace of God reborn among us. We think about what it means that Jesus is now there to be encountered again. Then we come to the next week. One of the things about coming to the next week is to realize that Easter is really about a beginning--the victory of Christ over the forces of sin and evil.

Maybe I’ve seen too many movies, but I get this image of these two forces coming to battle in front of the one way into the kingdom. You see all the forces of sin and evil following Jesus right down into the tomb, leaving the entrance to the kingdom open. The victory’s won because He’s taken them away, and now He comes back and acts as the greeter, the one encouraging us to come in, inviting us. As we sit there looking into the kingdom, hearing Jesus inviting us in, we may wonder, “What’s it look like inside?” These words of Jesus in the beginning of Chapter 5 of Matthew. I think, are a description of the topography of the kingdom, what it looks like inside, what we might expect to see as we follow Jesus. Sometimes I think people look at these verses as a way into the kingdom. I don’t see it that way. They are more a description of what happens as we go in, as we follow Jesus into this new country, as we turn from sin and evil and follow Jesus into the kingdom of God.

I’m one who believes that the kingdom of God is here, and present and among us. Not only is it coming soon, it is so soon that we can begin to see it now. We can begin to live

into it, and this is a description of what it looks like as we do that, some guidance as to how to do that, maybe. So what do these verses tell us?

As we begin to look at these blessings, do they suggest that now we just simply live a life of luxury because Jesus has won the battle? I sometimes feel that that's what I want. But as I look at the beginning of each of these verses, it doesn't look real simple. Blessed are the poor in spirit? Blessed are those who mourn? Are we supposed to become people who have poor spirits and be mournful all the time? I don't think that's what Jesus is saying, either. I think what we see as we look at these verses is that Jesus is saying, "When you follow me, you begin to care about the people around you. You begin to care about who God is." You begin to care, and when you begin to care there are times when you see things that are bad. You begin to see the chaos of the world around us. You begin to wonder why things are the way they are, why somebody makes the decisions they make, why their lives begin to spiral into a downward direction. There are reasons why we have poor spirits, sometimes, because there are bad things going on around us. There are things that aren't good. If you care, it affects you. We have those times where our spirits are poor and we mourn because we care. You might say that this whole thing is about caring, caring about others.

Another way of looking at it is to see the first three verses as leading to the fourth, and the next few verses as leading on. That central verse, then, is about hungering and thirsting for righteousness. It's about caring. That's what hungering and thirsting is. It's caring about having what we can eat and drink, wanting something so badly. And what is righteousness again? Remember, it can also be translated "justice." My translation of righteousness is being in right relationship with God. That spills over and leads us into a right relationship not only with God, but with all God's creation and all God's people. It's the hungering and thirsting that comes out of a caring because God first loved us. It's a caring that knows the wonder of God's grace and shares it. It's a hungering and thirsting for things to be made right as God would have them be--to have right relationship with God and with one another.

In many ways, the poorness of spirit, the mourning, the gentleness or meekness, the mercy, the pureness of heart (which is really a focus on God, another way of saying we hunger and thirst for God) the peacemaking--all those are about relationships, aren't they? About being set right with one another and with God.

Now it's a pretty realistic recognition that that's often a struggle. That it is the mourning and the poorness of spirit that we have to work through and sometimes it even leads to persecution and struggle. Yet as we walk into the kingdom of God, while we deal with the world that we're in, it's almost as if we're in this transition area, and that we go through these times of mourning because we care. What we find is that when we care, God cares. That's the second half of each verse. The first half is us caring, doing our part; the second half is God cares. God cares about those who are poor of spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. God cares about those who mourn for they shall be comforted. God cares about those who are gentle, cares about those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, cares about those who are merciful and that shall receive mercy. God

cares about those who are pure of heart, who really want to see God, they will see God. God cares about those who want to heal relationships, not just worrying about countries warring, not just those kind of peacemakers, but those who make peace with those in their own lives. God cares.

As we begin to see where Jesus is leading, as we see that we care and there's work in caring, there's also the wonder of the results. The interesting thing is that there's also this phrase "blessed are...". Sometimes we can say that the ending part is the blessing. We've mourned and we're comforted. That's fully the blessing. I found it interesting this week as I looked again at the word "blessing." It means to be characterized by transcendent joy because of good circumstances. I think that when we begin to follow Christ into the kingdom, doing that work of caring, not only do we get to experience the comfort, not only do we get to know the mercy, but there's a transcendent joy that comes with it. Transcendent simply means a joy that comes from beyond, that's unexplained, a joy that enters into our lives because it's a blessing. Because we are in the kingdom of God, because God is at work in our lives, we do get to share in the wonder of God's presence among us.

I don't think Jesus says you do these things so that you are blessed. He rather says that what you'll find, as you do these things, is the blessing. Have you ever shown mercy to someone, done something for them and perhaps they didn't even know what you did, but you see how their life is made better? You see a joy in their life? You don't really experience that joy directly, but you see it in their life. But then, you do experience a joy, a wonder. Where does that joy come from, the joy of having helped someone without any recognition? I think it is transcendent joy. I think it's the joy God gives us. It's the blessing part of it all. As we hear Jesus inviting us to begin walking into the kingdom together, we recognize that we have been loved and forgiven and can live into that kingdom through the love and grace of Christ. He's not saying it's all going to be easy. In fact he says there are some challenges along the way and he says don't let the challenges deter you for through them you find the wonder of God's grace, mercy and comfort, inheriting the earth, all kinds of wonderful things. And in the process there's also that transcendent joy that comes with working with God. It's an invitation that comes through the resurrection and by the grace of God. It's an invitation to us to walk into the kingdom. May you know God's blessings. Amen.