

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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Blessed Are You

Recently, someone asked me to share my call to ministry story with them. I am sure I've shared it with many of you over the course of my years here, but in the sheer retelling of the story, it reaffirmed my continued sense of call. You see, I was 14 years old when I first felt a nudge in my heart. I had always loved church and I was loving my youth group, but I also had never seen anyone who looked like me in the pulpit before. So I kept this nudge to myself because I did not think it was possible for someone like me to stand where I am standing today. When they say representation matters, I really do believe it impacts what we think we are able to do. Two years later, at the whopping age of 16 years old, on a youth mission trip in a rural city called Myton, in Utah, my youth group had the opportunity to lead worship for a congregation of 15 people and I preached my first sermon. I was so scared. I remember gluing my eyes to the manuscript and trying not to shake through it.

Afterward, as we shook hands with the small and kind congregation who thanked us for coming and leading and beautifying their church property, one particular woman stopped right in front of me. Without shaking my hand or reciting the same "thank yous" that I had heard from everyone that came before her, she simply looked at me in the eyes and said, "You know that part where you said...." and she recited what she had heard... "That really affected me. I needed to hear that today. Thank you." And then she walked away like she was still in thought.

That was the turning point for me. I was so surprised. If I, at 16 years old, interpreting scripture based on my own limited understanding, could be used by God to affect someone's life in a positive way? I *had* to pursue it. And so, I came back from that mission trip, told my pastor that I think I wanted to also be a pastor, and he began giving me opportunities to lead in worship and be in leadership roles and it snowballed from there.

I am here today because of the affirmation of call over and over in my life by God and by people God has brought into my life, but it began with a blessing spoken into an insecure teenager's life by a woman whose name I will never know. She will never know her impact on me, and that brief interaction we had will be a core memory that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

She spoke blessing into my life that then gave me the courage to act and verbalize something that I did not think was possible for a young Asian American girl to do.

When I remember that story, and I read these famous beatitudes by Jesus, I am again aware of the power of these blessings he names.

Up to this point, Jesus has prepared himself. He's recruited disciples of random people, been baptized by John...he's walked through the wilderness, been tempted and invited to walk away from his path, and has already started healing people left and right and teaching in the synagogues. He's acquired a huge following and right before our reading began today, scripture tells us that "great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan." Jesus has gone viral.

And when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, he delivers his first sermon.

Jesus SAW the crowds, friends. He looked out, noticed who was in the crowd, and chose these words we just heard as the first message he chooses to share. And it's not an exposition on the Hebrew scriptures, he does not begin with a list of what we should do or how we should be (although these beatitudes have been interpreted that way). He does not begin with instructions on how to live or give us a new set of commandments.

He's not even offering up platitudes like we might think he is. There is nothing transactional in his first words.

He speaks blessing upon them.

And the shocking part is that he blesses those whom he sees. Those that have forgotten or cannot believe that blessing is for them and their lives. Jesus begins his first sermon by prioritizing those whom the world has shoved aside, forgotten, belittled, and pushed to the margins.

Now I know that this word blessing can get muddied by our modern understanding of it. Because, really, Jesus, are those who mourn really #blessed?

Biblical scholars note that the word blessing is a translation of the Greek word *makarios*. Some translate this word as happy. Blessed are those... happy are those...which I know makes it little more confusing. Really, Jesus, happy are those who mourn? Isn't that contradictory? And so, in context, we need to understand how those in the first century might have heard these words from Jesus. Writer Robert Wilkens in his book *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, shares:

“for us the term happiness has come to mean “feeling good” or enjoying certain pleasures, a transient state that arrives and departs as circumstances change or fortune intervenes. For the ancients, happiness was a possession of the soul, something one acquired and that, once acquired, could not easily be taken away. Happiness designated the supreme aim of human life . . . living in accord with nature, in harmony with our deepest aspirations as human beings.”(Robert Louis Wilken, The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God)

In other words, being “blessed” in this passage is about a bigger picture than what we usually associate with it. It’s not a passing thing. It does not come about by having more stuff, acquiring things, having success or wealth. For these first century Christians, it connected closely to their sense of connectedness and unity with God. And so this word of blessing-of happy-was more connected to their sense that God was near in an eternal/everlasting sense.

Imagine receiving a declaration that you are beloved and near to the heart of God when no one in your community has ever told you that you could be as one who is poor in spirit, mourning, meek, and working for peace instead of working for the gains of this world. Imagine feeling far away from God and not believing that you are deserving of being close to God, and then someone walks up to you, looks at you in the eye, and tells you that you are.

One of my favorite theologians Debie Thomas shares it this way:

“What Jesus bears witness to in the Beatitudes is God’s unwavering proximity to pain, suffering, sorrow, and loss. God is nearest to those who are lowly, oppressed, unwanted, and broken. God isn’t obsessed with the shiny and the impressive; God is too busy sticking close to what’s messy, chaotic, unruly, and unattractive.

This is important to remember, because the first thing I tend to ask when I’m hurting is, “Where is God? Why has God abandoned me?” The Beatitudes assure me that God doesn’t exit my life when I find myself in low places. If anything, God is most present in the shadows. Most attentive in the fire. God is always close to the destitute, the anguished, the lost, and the confused. God faithfully accompanies those who go days, weeks, months, and years, hungry for a sign, a word, a crumb, a drop. Our hunger is not indicative of God’s absence. Our hunger is the sign we seek. The blessing we chase resides in the darkness.”

Friends, we are living in times where so many are residing in darkness. There are so many who are desperate, waiting, and longing for blessing. There are also some of us who have received the blessing and affirmation we need. Of course, we’ll need to be reminded again and again, but today, if you are in this category of living in the freedom of the blessing and unity you have found in the heart of God, for you all, I

want to invite you and challenge you to speak blessing into someone's life this week. Because like that woman who unknowingly blessed me, her words propelled me into action. And that is what those of us who are feeling that nearness and liberating love of God must do. We don't only soak it up. I mean, definitely soak it up first. But then move. We need to act. Jesus does not only speak these beatitudes, he lives them.

With the cries that are rising from the ground of lives lost and those still searching from the terrible earthquake in Syria and Turkey, with wars Ukraine and violence in so many places and those displaced still searching for home, for black lives that are still dying in this country enmeshed in systemic racism, for transgender siblings that have been targeted as a source of political battle, and for the precarious mental health so many are balancing along with the myriad of other shadow places people reside in these days, friends, that call to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God is one we need to heed in these days. Jesus spends his life trying to alleviate suffering. He does not tell the hungry to tighten their belts. He does not ignore the injustices of the politically powerful or tells people to "grin and bear" their pain because it's all part of God's plan. He acts. He heals. He abides and blesses. God incarnate. Jesus works to bring liberation, healing, justice, and love to everyone. We are called to do the same.

And so then, today, for those of you in the other category...if you are sitting in the shadow place of doubt, displacement, and feeling far from God, like Thomas said, your hunger is the sign you seek. You might not be able to feel it right now, but God is near. And so, challenged by Jesus' first part of the sermon on the mount, today, I want to close with a blessing for those who need it. Because Jesus saw the crowd, saw the people, and spoke sheer blessing on those whom society does not have much time for, people in pain, people who work for peace over profit, people who felt targeted and prosecuted for declaring the love of a God whose upside down kingdom freaked people out. He tells us who we are.

And so blessed are the poor in spirit, those who feel far away from God today, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who are crying out, "How long, O Lord?" because they cannot take the suffering anymore. Blessed are those who have nothing more to offer. Blessed are those who are those who are heartbroken this day. Blessed are those who do not know what to do next. Blessed are those who are afraid to come out and be who they fully are. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for you are beloved and Christ blesses you.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are those who received a diagnosis they did not want to hear. Blessed are those who are still waiting to find out if their family or friend made it through. Blessed are those who have loved deeply enough to know what loss feels like. Blessed are they who cannot fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else. Blessed are those

who have lost a child. Blessed are those who mourn for you are beloved and Christ blesses you.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the preschoolers who spill food all over the floor even when you warned them to be careful. Blessed are the kids who sit alone at lunchtime. Blessed is the one who now lives alone, trying to make new friends. Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the meek, for you are beloved and Christ blesses you.

Sisters and brothers and siblings in Christ, I know I could keep going, and I know some of you were gearing up for me to go through them all. But I want you to continue this sermon into this day and into this week. Now it's your turn to go and speak continued blessing for a world and for those who need to hear and receive it this day. You are the embodiment of Christ here and now, so trust that you can also speak blessing into a broken and hurting world and turn it upside down.

Blessed are you for you are the beloved child of God. May you believe that this day and always.

Amen.