**Epiphany: *The Light of the World Has Come***

**Sunday, February 2, 2020**

**Fourth Sunday After Epiphany**

**“Who Are the Blessed?” (Matthew 5:1-12)**

**1. Introduction**

Frederick Buechner, writer, theologian, and Presbyterian minister, offers the following reflections on this morning’s Gospel lesson:

“IF WE DIDN'T ALREADY KNOW but were asked to guess the kind of people Jesus would pick out for special commendation, we might be tempted to guess one sort or another of spiritual hero—men and women of impeccable credentials morally, spiritually, humanly, and every which way. If so, we would be wrong. Maybe those aren't the ones he picked out because he felt they didn't need the shot in the arm his commendation would give them. Maybe they're not the ones he picked out because he didn't happen to know any. Be that as it may, it's worth noting the ones he did pick out” (Frederick Buechner, “Beatitudes, *Whistling in the Dark).*

* Not the spiritual giants, but the “poor in spirit”
* Not the champions of faith who can rejoice even in the midst of suffering, but the ones who are mourning over their own losses
* Not the strong ones, but the gentle ones
* Not the ones who are righteous, but the ones who hope they will be someday and are well aware that the distance they still have to go is even greater than the distance they've already come.
* Not the winners of great victories over evil in the world, but the ones who are aware of the evil in themselves and are so are merciful when they find it in others.
* Not the totally pure, but the “pure in heart”
* Not the ones who have found peace in its fullness, but the ones who try to bring it about wherever and however they can
* Not the victors, but the victims, the ones who side with heaven and are on the losing side in the face of the brutal power of the world

Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with an invitation to the broken, the beat-up and the burnt-out to become part of the kingdom of God. As his sermon continues, he challenges his followers to adopt a particular way of living. But prior to his bold appeal, he offers a gracious invitation to all who are weary and heavy-laden to experience the blessings of God’s reign. *So, you don’t need to have it all together to follow Jesus*. Rather, God’s kingdom is for the poor in spirit, for those who mourn, for the humble and the hungry, for the merciful and the pure in heart, for the peacemaker and the persecuted. These are the kinds of people that Jesus gathers into his kingdom. So, you, who are beat-up and burdened, wobbly and weak-kneed, bent-over and bruised, welcome to the kingdom of God.

**2. The Beatitudes: *God’s Grace is Foundational for the Kingdom***

Matthew’s Gospel is comprised of 5 large sections of teaching (Matthew 5:1-7:28; 10:5-11:1; 13:1-53; 18:1-19:1; 24:1-26:1) with narrative episodes interspersed between them. The Sermon on the Mount is the longest and foundational for the Gospel. Matthew’s introduction to the Sermon presents it as a momentous occasion. Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, goes up the mountain, takes his seat as the authoritative teacher, calls his disciples and teaches them about the realities of God’s kingdom. His sermon presents a clear ethical challenge to his followers to take the path that leads to true righteousness, but the grace of God is foundational to his call. He begins his great sermon with the *beatitudes*, which demonstrate that the *grace of God is foundational* for life in the kingdom*.*

Jesus’ nine pronouncements of blessedness are called the *beatitudes,* a designation derived from *beatus,* the Latin word for *blessed.* God is the source of this blessing, for the recipients are clearly those who are in need of God’s generous provision. While most English translations simply read, “*Blessed are*,” our pew Bibles emphasize that God is the source of blessing by emphatically stating, “*God blesses those who*.” New Testament scholar, F.W. Beare describes the nature of this blessing: “The blessedness is not something that can be attained by the ‘pursuit of happiness’; not by any kind of social reconstruction that can be made on the basis of political programmes. Jesus is not represented as an advocate of social and economic reform or political revolution. The satisfactions promised to the blessed are not of their achieving; they are *the gift of God*” (Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew,* p. 127).

The biblical notion of being *blessed* is to be in a right relationship with God and in these *beatitudes* a right relationship with God is expressed by the idea of entering and participating in the kingdom of God. New Testament scholar, Donald Hagner describes this blessedness as “the nearly incomprehensible happiness of those who participate in the kingdom announced by Jesus.” He goes on to explain that this kingdom happiness is not a worldly happiness for “it refers to a *deep inner joy* of those who have long awaited the salvation promised by God and who now begin to experience its fulfilment” (Hagner, *Matthew,* p. 91). In these beatitudes, Jesus was proclaiming that God’s kingdom was already breaking into the world and as a result the blessings of the kingdom were already being experienced.

**3. Blessed are: *God’s Blessed Kingdom People***

As we go down the list of those who are blessed by God, we become a bit puzzled because they don’t fit the world’s definition of blessed or happy people. They are not the kinds of people that our culture defines as successful. In a world that values having it all together, those who endure the debilitating effects of mental illness are often maligned. In a Christian culture that esteems spiritual prowess, it’s hard to admit one’s spiritual poverty. In a society that expects people “to just get over it,” the grief-stricken are often misunderstood. In a world that exalts the powerful, the truly humble don’t seem to fit in. In a culture that revels in the delights of tasty food and exotic drinks, being hungry and thirsty for God appears to be a bit strange. In a world bent on retaliation, showing mercy is considered a weakness. In a society that places great importance on looking good on the outside, a concern for the health of one’s heart and soul seems out of place. In a society where the battle lines are drawn between people and groups, those who seek genuine reconciliation are few and far between. Yet, in God’s counter cultural kingdom, those who don’t fit into the world are blessed by him.

God’s blessed kingdom people include: the soul sick, the spiritually poor, the grief-stricken, the humble, those who long for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. Hardly people that our world would call blessed! So, why does Jesus call them blessed? It is because they recognize their need for God and stand ready to receive what he graciously gives to them. The beatitudes are good news for all who recognize that they don’t have it all together and are in desperate need God’s amazing grace. Jesus’ invitation to enter the kingdom of God is open to the beat-up and burdened, the wobbly and weak-kneed, the bent-over and bruised.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. What does it mean to be “poor in spirit”? Is it the psychological condition of the downtrodden? Does it describe a person’s spiritual condition before God? Or does it refer to those with a humble spirit who are dependent upon God’s grace. All these have been suggested as possibilities for understanding this beatitude. But I find Eugene Peterson’s translation most helpful, “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule” (Matthew 5:3, *The Message*). Do you feel like you’re end of your rope? Do you wonder if you have the strength to carry on? Do you feel spiritually depleted and empty? Welcome to the kingdom of God. “With less of you there is more of God and his rule.”

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* We are surrounded with pain, sorrow, grief and sadness. We weep tears for our losses and for the losses of others. The deep groaning of a world longing for God’s rule weighs heavy on our souls as we see and experience its sorrow, violence and turmoil. Yet amidst our pain, “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort . . . comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 Corinthians 1:4). Even though God comforts us now, we will continue to weep tears until that day, when his kingdom comes in all its fullness and “he will wipe every tear from our eyes and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4). Are you deeply saddened because of life’s losses? Welcome to the kingdom of God. “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you” (Matthew 5:4, *The Message*).

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* In a world that exalts the powerful and the ideology of getting ahead, it’s easy to feel insignificant and it’s hard to be humble. We long to be noticed, acknowledged, congratulated and applauded. Some of us have even experienced the pain of being humbled, marginalized, or ignored by others. To those who are lowly in the eyes of the world, God promises a place at his banquet table. Jesus said, “The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matthew 23:11-12).

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.* Those who are hungry and thirsty for God share the words of the Psalmist when he declared, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:1-2). When people hunger and thirst for righteousness, they long for God’s will to be fulfilled in their lives and in all the earth. This deep longing coupled with a profound need for God’s righteousness results in a intense desire is for all that God has for them. Again, Peterson’s translation is striking, “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat” (Matthew 5:6, *The Message*). Are you hungry and thirsty for God? Welcome to the kingdom of God and enjoy the best meal you’ll ever eat.

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*. In a world dominated by payback and revenge, forgiveness seems to be in short supply. Even if we don’t actively seek revenge for those who have injured us, we often hold on to feelings of resentment or bitterness toward others. Take it from me, it’s easy to hold onto a grudge and difficult to let it go and forgive others. Yet those who are welcomed into the kingdom of God have experienced the greatness of God’s grace and the immensity of his forgiveness. We are urged to forgive others because we have been forgiven by God.

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*. In Jesus’ religious world, a lot of stress was put on outer purity; on eating the right kind of food and not touching the wrong things; on following the rules. This focus on ritual purity led some to minimize inner purity. Jesus called his followers to a more profound kind of purity that extended into the heart and soul. When he interpreted the Law, he got to the heart of the matter that went beyond the mere observance of external rules. Are we satisfied with looking religious or are we willing to let Jesus clean up the inner rooms of our lives? Are we content to follow the rules or are we willing to devote our lives whole-heartedly to Jesus?

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.* At the very heart of the kingdom is radical peacemaking. Christ is our peace and he has reconciled us to God and as a result we are reconciled to one another (Ephesians 2:14). In a world that is focused on building walls that separate, we are called to build bridges that connect. In a society that values competition, we are challenged to practice cooperation. Yet it begins here, in our congregation where we learn to walk side-by-side and hand-in-hand. Are we willing to make the peace with our brothers and sisters? Are we willing to take God’s peacemaking, reconciling love out into the world?

When we heed Christ’s invitation to enter God’s kingdom and live out its counter-cultural values in the world, we will experience resistance and opposition. But take heart, *you’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom* (Matthew 5:10, *The Message*).

**4. Implications**

Taking Christ’s beatitudes to heart:

• Let’s welcome and love the soul sick, the spiritually poor, the grief-stricken, the oppressed, and anyone who’s looking for answers to life. Let’s hesitate from passing judgment on them or minimizing their brokenness by offering band-aid solutions. Let’s patiently walk with all who struggle and help them on their journey to Jesus.

• Let’s honestly confess our deep need for God and humbly accept his amazing grace. Let’s stop hiding behind our religious masks and be truthful with one another about the heart issues of our lives.

• Let’s seek to be God’s kingdom people in our homes, our work places, our neighbourhoods and our church. Let’s embody God’s merciful and reconciling love by our words and our deeds.

And may the *blessing* *of God* be upon us all.