

Isaiah 61:1-11

Matthew 5:1-12

February 25, 2018

Second Sunday in Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

GOD BLESS YOU

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In this terrible cold and flu season, we've had plenty of opportunities to say "God bless you" when people sneezed. All around the world, different cultures have different ways of responding to a sneeze. Many are variations of words such as Gesundheit or Salud, both of which mean something like "good health."

Have you ever wondered why we say "God bless you" when somebody sneezes? One early tradition thought the body was trying to rid itself of evil spirits when somebody sneezed. In that instant, it was important to say "God bless you" to keep those same spirits (or others or even more) from going back into the person's body. There was also the belief that the heart stops briefly when you sneeze, so asking God's blessing was a way to keep life going.

Then there is the story of Pope Gregory I at the end of the 6th century A.D. When he became pope, Italy was in the grips of the plague. The Pope issued an order that people pray without ceasing for divine intervention. He commanded that sneezers be answered with "God bless you," since a sneeze was thought to be a sign of the onset of the plague. He also directed that people make the sign of the cross over the mouth of the sneezer, sort of as protection against the plague. Eventually, "God bless you" became a common response to sneezes.¹ Maybe people don't even give a second thought to asking God to bless someone these days.

But Jesus' opening words to his Sermon on the Mount offer an opportunity to give a second thought to God's blessings. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is sometimes referred to as his inaugural address, in which he lays out his plan and program for his upcoming ministry. In fact, as you read through the Sermon on the Mount, you begin to realize that the way of life Jesus describes is the very life Jesus lived. It is a life oriented, first and foremost, toward God and God's ways. And that God-orientation inevitably leads Jesus to treat God's people a certain way.

I've heard people say, and have even felt the same way at times, that Jesus sets the bar too high in his Sermon on the Mount, especially when he says things like, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The question is, in his Sermon on the Mount, is Jesus giving us a new set of commandments or is he describing the way life is in God's kingdom? I think most of the time we read and hear the Sermon on the Mount as "prescriptive" — "Thou shalt . . ." But what if we hear the Sermon on the Mount as descriptive of, as someone has put it, "a whole new way of being God's people"?

To that end, we begin with the word that begins each of the beatitudes — “Blessed.” Maybe the most familiar blessing from God in the whole Bible is Numbers 6:24-26, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” Instead of “blessed” in these verses from Matthew 5, some translations say, “Happy are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, etc., etc.” This isn’t the kind of happiness that depends on positive life circumstances. It’s more the kind of happiness or joy that the apostle Paul wrote about (remember, he was in prison at the time), “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. . . I have learned to be content with whatever I have.” (Philippians 4:4, 11) Some translations even say, “Congratulations to you poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.”

So, you see, Jesus is offering God’s blessing on those people who already show in their lives and actions how to live in the kingdom of heaven. Grammatically, we can say that Jesus is declaring a blessing for a certain way of life, rather than ordering a certain way of life. His statements are declarative, not imperative. But there seems to be a fine line between the two. Of course, it depends on our perspective. If we hear the Beatitudes as some sort of “to-do” list to get into heaven or to make our life easier or better or even how to be a better Christian, we might miss the mark.

God’s blessing describes a way of life that is absolutely counter-cultural, even counter-intuitive. We live in a world that doesn’t place much value on humility, righteousness, mercy, and peacemaking. And yet that is the very lifestyle that God blesses. If nothing else, perhaps this introduction to Jesus’ ministry can open our eyes to the surprising realization that the lifestyle described in the Beatitudes is reality, the sure sign of the presence of God’s kingdom in our lives and our world.

When Nancy heard I was preaching on the Beatitudes today, she told me she had something to share with me. On my desk Tuesday morning, I found a version of the Beatitudes written by Rev. Ann Jahnes, who is the pastor of the Southport Presbyterian Church. Ann’s interpretation of Jesus’ words gives us a good insight into the “blessing” of this way of life as God’s kingdom people.

*When you stop thinking so much about yourself, you discover a great reward.
The Lord blesses you with confident assurance and trust.*

*Whenever your heart breaks, it will be re-formed to become capable of more
love than ever before, because through sorrow, you have learned compassion.*

*When your spirit is gentle, it will also be strong. When your hands are tender,
they will be able to carry many hurts. When your feet step with quiet conviction, they
will carry you to paths of service.*

*When you care passionately about what is just and fair and honest and loving,
whatever you accomplish will make a difference.*

*When you reach out in forgiveness, affection, and welcome, such peace will
come back to you.*

*When you refuse to allow your vision to be clouded by polluted worldly values,
what you see is God’s presence, everywhere.*

When you live and work and pray for peace, you understand that we are all part of God's beloved family, and you find your happy place in God's earthly and heavenly home.

Even when you suffer because you are living in harmony with what you believe, that suffering is better than to live without integrity or faith. Ultimately, what can harm you, if God is love and you abide in it?2

I have a minister colleague and friend, Rev. Edward Barnhill who, every time I see him and ask him, "How are you?" replies, "Blessed to be a blessing!" Isn't that a great thought? It's so easy to hang onto God's blessings for our own benefit and enjoyment. But "Blessed to be a blessing!" is a whole different way of looking at God's blessings. One writer puts it this way in her comments on Jesus' opening remarks, "The Beatitudes are not just blessings but a call to action. The Beatitudes are a call to action for the sake of creating the world God imagines. And these days we need this reminder — when our imagination may be limited. When our hopes for the future might have been dimmed. When we think what we do and what we say and what we believe does not matter. . . The Beatitudes are a call to action to be church, a call to action to make Jesus present and visible and manifest when the world tries desperately to silence those who speak the truth."³

It's all too easy to make the Beatitudes into some sort of personal self-help manual. However, if we do that, we make God's blessings all about us. The Beatitudes aren't talking about life in general, in which everyone encounters sorrow and suffering and other challenges. That just comes with being human. Instead, Jesus is talking about what it means to live as the people of God. And that very kind of life might well bring sorrow and suffering and other challenges for Jesus' sake. That is why the Beatitudes bring us comfort and cause us to take stock of how we live as God's people. The same preacher I just quoted also writes, "The Beatitudes are a call to action to point out just who Jesus really is. Perhaps not the Jesus you want. Perhaps the Jesus who likely rubs you the wrong way. Perhaps the Jesus that tells you the truth about yourself. The Jesus who reminds you, at the most inconvenient times and places, what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about."⁴

In April 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested and put in jail in Birmingham, Alabama. Someone smuggled a newspaper to him that contained a statement by eight white clergymen calling for resistance against Dr. King and his non-violent methods. Dr. King began to write a response to the letter, at first in the margins of the newspaper, then on scraps of paper provided by a jail worker, and then on a pad of paper that his lawyer was allowed to give him. Dr. King's response came to be known as The Letter from Birmingham Jail. As he wrote about the silence of religious organizations and churches about matters of racial equality, he recalled how the early church lived and acted in its own culture. Dr. King wrote, "In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society."⁵

Using Dr. King's imagery, we might well describe the Beatitudes as a thermostat. The life Jesus describes as a life of blessing certainly doesn't "record the ideas and principles of popular opinion." The life of blessing Jesus describes "transforms the mores of society." It wouldn't take much work to turn the Beatitudes into a useful prayer of confession for this Lenten season. We might take comfort from God's blessings, but we also can recognize in Jesus' opening words how far short we fall of living the life characteristic of God's kingdom.

But all is not lost! For such a life does, in fact, bring God's blessing. Maybe it seems too ambitious to think that how we live and act as people of God's kingdom can transform the entire world. If so, we can begin with our own lives and our own communities of family, school, workplace, and church. Lent is often thought of as a time to "give something up." Many religious traditions encourage people to "take something on" during Lent, such as increased prayer or Bible reading or acts of compassion. In closing, I'd like to share a writing by William Arthur Ward that combines the giving up and the taking on. You may well have heard this before; it's about fasting from and feasting on ways of living. As I read it again in light of Jesus' words at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount, it almost sounded like the Beatitudes themselves.

Fast from judging others; feast on the Christ dwelling in them.

Fast from emphasis on differences; feast on the unity of all life.

Fast from apparent darkness; feast on the reality of light.

Fast from words that pollute; feast on phrases that purify.

Fast from discontent; feast on gratitude.

Fast from anger; feast on patience.

Fast from pessimism; feast on optimism.

Fast from worry; feast on trust.

Fast from complaining; feast on appreciation.

Fast from negatives; feast on affirmatives.

Fast from unrelenting pressures; feast on unceasing prayer.

Fast from hostility; feast on nonviolence.

Fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness.

Fast from self-concern; feast on compassion for others.

Fast from personal anxiety; feast on eternal Truth.

Fast from discouragement; feast on hope.

Fast from facts that depress; feast on truths that uplift.

Fast from lethargy; feast on enthusiasm.

Fast from suspicion; feast on truth.

Fast from thoughts that weaken; feast on promises that inspire.

Fast from shadows of sorrow; feast on the sunlight of serenity.

Fast from idle gossip; feast on purposeful silence.

Fast from problems that overwhelm; feast on prayer that undergirds.

Gentle God, during this season of fasting and feasting, gift us with your presence, so we can be a gift to others in carrying out your work.

God bless you!

Let us pray:

I chose a prayer by William Barclay for my prayer after the sermon. Some of you have probably used and read Barclay's Bible commentaries over the years. He was a minister in the Church of Scotland and professor at the University of Glasgow. This is a Prayer of Contrition for Ash Wednesday. I offer this prayer on our behalf, in the spirit of Jesus' Beatitudes.

***Save us, O God,
From the blindness,
 which is not even aware that it is sinning;
From the pride,
 which cannot admit that it is wrong;
From the self-will,
 which can see nothing but its own way;
From the self-righteousness,
 which can see no flaw within itself;
From the callousness,
 which has sinned so often that it has ceased to care;
From the defiance,
 which is not even sorry for its sins;
From the evasion,
 which always puts the blame on someone or something else;
From the heart so hardened,
 that it cannot repent.***

***Give us at all times,
Eyes which are open to our faults;
A conscience which is sensitive and quick to warn;
A heart that cannot sin in peace,
 but is moved to regret and remorse.***

***So grant that being truly penitent we may be truly forgiven,
so that we may find that your love is great enough
to cover all of this sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen***

NOTES

¹“Why do we say, ‘God bless you,’ when someone sneezes?” at www.gotquestions.org

²Rev. Ann Jahnes, Southport Presbyterian Church, 1025 E. Moore Street, Southport, NC 28461

³Karoline Lewis, “Righteous Living,” January 22, 2017, www.workingpreacher.org

⁴Ibid.

⁵Two sources. Olivia Shen Green, “Thermometer or Thermostat? MLK Jr’s Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 19, 2013, at www.blogs.cisco.com and “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” at www.en.wikipedia.org.