

Blessed  
Center Church  
February 2, 2020  
Rochelle A. Stackhouse

Matthew 5:1-8

In the world of Matthew's time, people of all faiths considered that God was present and active with those who succeeded in the world. Those who managed to get wealth, children, positions of respect or power. "Blessed" means in a close relationship with God, a "right" relationship with God. If that is the case for someone, then they will get "blessings" of property, family, respect. This was the common belief.

In the world of our time, I think a lot of folk feel the same way. There's a whole movement about the "prosperity gospel," where wealth is a sign of God's favor. Think about how many of us use that term "blessed." We say folk are blessed with things work out right for them, when they get the job or the relationship or the child or the position of respect.

The first 6 Beatitudes turn that understanding of who is blessed upside down. According to Jesus, who is close to God? Who is in a right relationship with God? Who is blessed?

The poor in spirit, the despairing, those needing a spiritual empowerment.  
Those who are sad and lonely, who have lost someone.  
Those who are humble and not always having to be in the limelight and get all the attention.  
Those who see all that is wrong in the world and in their own lives and deeply hunger to make it right.  
Those who don't seek revenge, but are merciful and forgiving.  
Those who are sincere, who don't mask their true selves to try to get something.

This was not what that crowd expected to hear. The scholar David Lose puts it this way:

"to proclaim that God regularly shows up in mercy and blessing just where you least expect God to be -- with the poor rather than the rich, those who are mourning rather than celebrating, the meek and the peacemakers

rather than the strong and victorious. This is not where citizens of the ancient world look for God and, quite frankly, it's not where citizens of our own world do either.”

Do you hear the good news in these verses? If you are poor in spirit or mourning or passionate for truth or hurt and wanting to forgive or refusing to mask your true self for gain, then God is with you in the closest way imaginable, walking you through it to the other side, knowing that, having experienced these things in life, you are better able to understand the urgency of what God is up to in creating an alternative way to the values of our society and the pain those values causes. That's the kingdom of God. God longs to wrap their arms around you in comfort when you hurt so that you experience a depth of love no human being can give. You get the picture.

Blessing is in God's presence where God's presence is most needed, not in an imagined reward for good living.

Read 3-8 again.

Matthew 5:9-12

Now Jesus takes things a little further, upending the norm and challenging his listeners not to be afraid to enter into Kingdom building, knowing God is one with those who enter the struggle for justice and truth.

It is not the warriors, the rulers, the powerful who seek to control who are in right relationship with God, but rather those who passionately give their lives to making peace. In fact, they are so close to God as to be seen as God's children.

God is very close to those who hold onto the values of love and mercy, humility and a hunger for what is right, even when they get in trouble for doing so, even when people insult them or belittle them or mock them. God is close to them because they are trying to work with God in turning the world upside down, again and again and again, in the small everyday acts of love and resistance, as well as the bigger quest to bring

justice on a societal scale. Jesus tells us we do not do this work alone, but we are blessed, God is close beside us with spirit power.

Do you hear that these 12 verses carry the same radical hope and vision as Mary's Magnificat? They are not just nice pats on the head or pretty poetry. They lay out clearly where God's attention is and where God acts most closely beside us. They lay out clearly where the signs of God's activity are unmistakable, and where we can find power and hope. They remind us we are closest to God when we are most vulnerable and not putting up barriers to God's ability to be close to us. They remind us of God's passion for the continuing project of forming the Beloved Community on earth. They remind us that these words are not only for individuals, but groups, for they are all plural, so that our church is closest to God in these places as well.

Listen one more time. Read verses 9-12. Amen.