

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**January 30, 2022**  
**Matthew 5:1–12**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Open our eyes, Lord, that we may see you in new ways. Open our ears Lord, that we may hear you in new ways. Open our hearts, Lord, that we may experience your love in new ways. Open our arms Lord, that we may serve you in new ways. Open us, lord, to the possibilities and the path of following you more faithfully. In Jesus name, Amen.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Bless you.... I’m blessed... Bless his heart...

What exactly do we mean when we say something, or someone is blessed? Talking about trends on social media, author Jessica Bennett provided a comical commentary on the obsession with the notion of “being blessed.” She quips, “There’s nothing quite like invoking holiness as a way to brag about your life. But calling something ‘blessed’ has become the go-to term for those who want to boast about an accomplishment while pretending to be humble, fish for a compliment, acknowledge a success (without sounding too conceited), or purposely elicit envy. Blessed, ‘divine or supremely favored,’ is now used to explain that coveted TED Talk invite as well as to celebrate your grandmother’s 91st birthday.”<sup>i</sup>

For many folks, particularly on social media, and perhaps for a lot of folks who might consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious, the idea of being blessed has become a term for folks to simply let others know about their good fortune while also alluding to some kind of divine force at play. For some, including a significant number of Christians, being blessed is a sign of God’s favor. Their ability to buy material goods is directly aligned with the belief that their prosperity is a sign of being blessed by God.

What does it mean to be blessed?

I don’t think it’s about the humble brag on social media or is it about God showing you favor because you were able to purchase a fancy car.

Blessing is a big deal in scripture.

Perhaps one of the most significant blessings in the older testament, is God's blessing of the patriarch Abraham. In Genesis 12 God tells Abraham "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

But did you notice the purpose for which Abraham is blessed? God says, "I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing."

God doesn't promise Abraham lots of stuff or an easy life, but God does offer a blessing to Abraham so that Abraham and those that come after him, his descendants, can be a blessing for others. For the families of the earth...

"I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing."

How we think about what it means to be blessed, frames our life.

Jesus, like he so often does, shakes things up.

These declaration of blessings by Jesus are at the beginning of his public ministry, his first sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. As the crowds of people gather, Jesus starts his sermon with a list of what it means to be blessed; of who is blessed. I think it might be a reminder that blessing is not about us, so much as it is about others.

The beatitudes (or blessings) in Matthew 5, these opening verses where Jesus reminds us of who is blessed, are, well, dangerous. A pastor once said, if you want to get in trouble for your preaching, preach on the beatitudes. These blessings, these reminders, can make us a little uncomfortable.

I'm good with blessed are those who are merciful, because that's a good thing.

I'm all in for blessed are the pure in heart, because I want to love God and well, mostly I think I have a good heart.

Ok, well, blessed are the poor in spirit, that helps because maybe if I don't have a pure heart all the time, it means I'm poor in spirit, so I'm covered there. Whew.

Blessed are those who mourn, well, that means that something has gone wrong, or someone has died, I'm not sure I want to be blessed for that.

Blessed are the peacemakers –well, yeah, because peace is a good thing – but Jesus keeps talking and says blessed are the people who are persecuted, but that doesn't sound good, and then blessed are you when people revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you.

On second thought...

Maybe I can't live up to these beatitudes. Maybe they don't sound so nice.

But maybe these blessings are not something we need to live up to.

Pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber, says, “what if the beatitudes aren't about a list of conditions we should try and meet to be blessed. What if these are not virtues we should aspire to but what if Jesus saying blessed are the meek is not instructive –what if it's performative? ...meaning the pronouncement of blessing is actually what confers the blessing itself. Maybe the sermon on the mount is all about Jesus' seemingly lavish blessing of the world around him especially that which society doesn't seem to have much time for, people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance. So maybe Jesus is actually just blessing people, especially the people who never seem to receive blessings otherwise. I mean, come on, doesn't that just *sound* like something Jesus would do?”<sup>ii</sup>

It isn't about us trying really hard to be meeker, poorer and more mournful, so that we might be blessed in the eyes of God and others.

The beatitudes do not say, "if you do this..." you will be blessed.

Instead, it is Jesus giving out blessing to those that need a blessing.

"You are blessed"

"I will bless you, so that you will bless others."

"You are blessed, in order to be a blessing."

Writer and Franciscan Friar, Richard Rohr, notes that we often take Jesus' teaching and think about it as some kind of reward-punishment system that is supposed to take place later. But counters this with the idea that Jesus "is not giving us a set of prescriptions for later nearly as much as a set of descriptions of how life works now. The self that Jesus himself teaches from, and then offers to us is our true self in God." As I reminded us a few weeks back, this is what we are, God's beloved and blessed children. We are a blessing. Now. In the present tense.

And, like many things of faith, if we are honest, it can be messy, and not altogether perfect. Which is good because, well, we aren't perfect. But God can still, and does, use our imperfection.

Again, Nadia Bolz-Weber imagines a different beatitudes for our times. She imagines Jesus might say now,

- Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised.
- Blessed are those who have nothing to offer.
- Blessed are they for whom nothing seems to be working.
- Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.

- Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else.
- Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet"
- Blessed are the forgotten.
- Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented.
- Blessed are the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard, for they are those with whom Jesus chose to surround himself.
- Blessed are those without documentation.
- Blessed are the ones without lobbyists.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are they who know there has to be more than this. Because they are right.

Instead of viewing the beatitudes as spiritual promises for some later time, what if they could serve more as operating principles? As ethical guidelines that frame who we are?

I once heard speaker and author, Brian McLaren suggests at a preaching conference that instead of working to put the Ten Commandments up in public places, Christians should work to put up the Beatitudes. He said, "What we consider blessed will be the ethos we desire and imitate." Our "ethos will determine our ethics," and "Our ethics will create our future." Let me say that again. "What we consider blessed will be the ethos we desire and imitate." Our "ethos will determine our ethics," and "Our ethics will create our future."

If you noticed, the beatitudes are future oriented and offer a call to the community of faith. Blessed are these people, *for they will be...* healed, fulfilled, joyful, have full bellies and quenched thirst. In these blessings, Jesus invites us to consider the place of change and transformation.

Jesus points us to the place and amongst the people where God is at work. “Not simply, or even primarily, in places of strength, but in places of vulnerability – amid our grief, alongside those who exercise mercy and work for righteousness, and in so many other activities the world considers not just meek but weak.”<sup>iii</sup>

God shows up where we least expect it and invites us into those places. Blessed to be a blessing.

This past week, during the bible study at noon on Thursday, we looked at some of those differences and I’ve been thinking about how the writers of Luke and Matthew talk about the poor. In Luke, the scripture says the poor are blessed, but the verse in Matthew says, “blessed are the poor in spirit.” This is where Jesus starts.

I often thought that Matthew was changing this from poor to “poor in spirit” to try and soften the message, to not make it so absurd. But as I think about it more, it’s pretty profound, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

Blessed are those that are depleted. Empty. In despair. Blessed are those who are discouraged, who feel like they have nothing left. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Despite the despair, discouragement, the emptiness, nonetheless, Jesus says, you are blessed.

Spirit in scripture is the same word as wind or breath, so if you're poor in spirit you're winded. You're breathless. You can't breathe. You're out of breath and feel like you can't go on.

At times when we are struggling, we may not be paying attention much to the spirit, to the presence of God, but then perhaps those times are necessary for us to experience the blessing of the awareness of the presence of God.

Have you had the wind or breath knocked out of you? You are blessed.

You poor in Spirit, you are already honored by the God who sees you struggling to hold onto your faith in this world.

The experience of the present doesn't define the future. The grace of God that is real now, is also the grace that pulls us forward into a new reality and into hope. And calls us, as we understand ourselves to be blessed, also to be a blessing.

May we know we are blessed, and may we hear the invitation to be a blessing.

May the Lord bless us all with poverty of spirit, with a heart broken open with meekness, with hunger and thirst for justice, with a merciful heart, with a pure heart, with creative collective action for peace, with courage to stand up and be persecuted, with joy in joining the prophetic mission of God.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup>Jessica Bennett, "They Feel 'Blessed': Blessed Becomes a Popular Hashtag on Social Media," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/fashion/blessed-becomes-popular-word-hashtag-social-media.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/fashion/blessed-becomes-popular-word-hashtag-social-media.html).

<sup>ii</sup> Nadia Bloz-Weber, <https://www.hopelutheran.ca/blog/some-modern-beatitudes>

<sup>iii</sup> David Lose, <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/10/all-saints-a-transformation/>