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Bridge Street United Church  
February 4, 2024  
Rev. Dr. John H. Young  
Readings: I John 3:1-3; Psalm 34; Matthew 5:1-12

### Thinking About the Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-12, or the Beatitudes as that passage from Matthew is known, is a passage that can give you pause, if you think carefully about the words. Nine sentences, each beginning with the word “Blessed” or, in some translations, “Happy,” or “Joyful.” Blessed or happy or joyful because these individuals live in a way the passage suggests is most pleasing to God. They experience, or will experience, God’s kingdom. As the passage also makes clear, living in this way will mean they are likely to meet opposition in the world.

It is a passage that is among the better known in Scripture. It does not have the familiarity of a passage such as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, or even a passage such as Luke 2:1-20, the story of Jesus’ birth in a stable in Bethlehem, a story we read every year on Christmas Eve. But it is one that for many of us, as we hear the passage begin, we think, I have heard this passage before. These words are at least somewhat familiar.

I remember as a child that at my grandmother’s farm there was a plaque on the dining room wall, a plaque containing this passage. I remember that the background was a light brown almost a beige colour, with the wording in dark brown, slightly raised letters. I need to say that my grandmother’s farm house had very few things on the walls—three family photos and several framed sayings done in needlepoint are all I remember, besides that plaque. I say that because, I think, in an earlier era, this piece of Scripture was better known and plaques such as the one at

my grandmother's house functioned as a reminder of the faith tradition, especially among mainline Protestants. It functioned as a challenging expression of what a life of faith would look like and of the divine grace required to come anywhere close to leading one's life accordingly.

This passage is also a traditional Scripture lesson for All Saints Day, or November 1. One reason I chose this passage for today's service is because of the act of remembrance we are doing today. Those of you with a lengthier history at Bridge Street will know that on the Sunday closest to November 1 each year, we remember persons associated with the congregation who have died in the previous twelve months. What we are doing today is to remember those who died between November, 2019, and November, 2022, because, with the Covid shutdown, those individuals had not been remembered before. We are also including several individuals who should have been remembered last October. And it is important to remember those whom we have known. So, it was against that background that I chose to read the Beatitudes, a passage associated with All Saints Day.

And it is an association that makes good sense. In Matthew's Gospel, the Beatitudes are the first element in a section of teachings and sayings of Jesus that runs for three chapters. But while the rest of those three chapters offers instruction about specific things—for example, the Lord's Prayer, which in Matthew's Gospel is found in chapter six, or how we ought to respond to our enemies, or judging others—these opening verses are more of a reflection on what a life of following Jesus will look like. The rest of chapter 5, and chapters 6 and 7, offer specific dos and don'ts related to particular things, but these verses speak about an orientation, about the general approach to life, to be taken by those who would be followers of Jesus. These verses also speak about the reaction we are likely to experience if we chose to follow Jesus in a serious, intentional way.

There are nine sentences or statements in the Beatitudes. The first and the last two are in the present tense, and I'll come back to them in a minute, but the second through the seventh are all in the future tense.

- “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” mourning here being less about mourning the loss of someone by death, and much more our regret or our lament about the world not being the way we want to see, the way we think God wants to see it. Our comfort lies in the hope we have that one day this world will become the world God wants it to be.
- “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Meekness—not the attitude we generally see, especially among those offering political leadership. Meekness refers here to a gentleness in our approach to life and to others. We are not being asked to turn ourselves into doormats for someone else, but to an undergirding care and concern for others that marks our approach to life.

I could go on, but, for reasons of length, I shall not, at least today. Doing an adequate explanation of each of the Beatitudes would require another sermon series, not a sermon on a day when I should be shorter than usual. And I want today to speak about the overall purpose of the Beatitudes in Scripture and in the Christian life. But just to continue going through numbers two through seven, notice that the verbs in the concluding clause are all in the future tense:

- 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 the children of God.

All in the future tense. All an indication that those who try to exhibit these characteristics are blessed, or happy, or joyful, and do contribute to the coming of God's kingdom, experiencing something of that kingdom now even as its full consummation lies in the future.

But the first and the last two are in the present tense. They speak to the likely reality, especially the last two, that seeking to live in a way that follows those other six, genuinely trying to be a follower of Jesus and to live in alignment with those values, brings. Seeking to be a follower in our day makes you part of a relatively small minority. It is to live in a way that runs counter to the prevailing practice in our society. Thus, it is likely to result in you experiencing some sidelining in our society, some pity from folks who believe you are misguided in an approach to life that values others as much as oneself, and some downright opposition when you advocate for refugees, or for people who are homeless, or for anything else that runs contrary to the contemporary world view in our society that caring for myself and my family are the only things that really matter.

I want to come back to today, and to the people we shall remember. When we speak about remembering the saints, or about the communion of saints, we are not using the word "saint" in the stereotypical way it is often used, as a person whose life was as close to perfect as any human life can be. We are, rather, talking about people who sought to live faithfully as they understood doing so, and most of them in a quiet, ongoing witness to the things they believed, and what they felt called to do. The Beatitudes offers one such orientation, one none of us is likely to live fully but one that offers a good guide for those who would be followers.

We want to remember those who have gone before us, especially those whose names we shall soon hear, but others who have gone before us or who have been our companions but whose death occurred many years ago. Each of us is a mixture of saint and sinner, but it is in the

saintly part of those who have gone before us that we find inspiration and insight and renewed strength.

In Matthew's Gospel, the previous chapter to the Beatitudes recounts Jesus calling his disciples. He called folks who fished for a living, a tax collector, a varied group of very ordinary people, people like you and me. As those of us who are now called, may this passage, and the varied witnesses to the Christian faith whom we have known, instruct us now for living as faithfully as we can in our day.

And to the God who created our world, to Jesus through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of God with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

### **Resources**

Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown, eds. *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1, Advent Through Transfiguration*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

Long, Thomas G. *Matthew*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.