

Blessed Despite Appearances

The second of five sermons in the Lenten series

“A People of Salt and Light—Jesus’ Model for Community”

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- Matthew 5:1-12 ¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them....
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: By his teaching and preaching Jesus is forming us into a people embodying the Kingdom of God for the world.

There were no posters posted at the Galilee fishing pier. There were no flyers distributed in Capernaum. No billboards along Seaside Lane announcing “One Day Only – Jesus of Nazareth: the ‘Sermon on the Mount Tour!’” As famous as it may be to us today, the Sermon on the Mount wasn’t a monumental, one-time seaside revival event.

There are university and seminary professors who spend their careers studying sacred scripture and secular literature, history and the sociology of ancient cultures. As they studied the literary form called a gospel and Matthew’s gospel in particular, scholars have determined that the author of the first gospel compiled several people’s recollections of the sayings and teachings of Jesus. Matthew then carefully arranged them into one extended discourse which he had Jesus delivering in a traditional teaching setting on a hillside. As we read Matthew’s gospel today we picture Jesus preaching to a crowd assembled around and below him: his Sermon on the Mount.

For four weeks this sermon series will take us into the Sermon on the Mount. What’s more, I’ll be leading a Lenten Bible Study looking at other aspects of the Sermon on the Mount, a Bible study that will build upon these sermons. That Bible study starts tonight and will be offered three times a week: Sunday nights, Monday mornings, and Tuesday afternoons. I hope you’ll sign up for it after today’s service.

Today we begin with the most famous part of the Sermon on the Mount: a collection of nine prophetic, powerful, reassuring sayings called the Beatitudes. But before we delve into those, let’s consider the setting: both the literary setting in the gospel and the physical setting of the sermon.

Let’s do that by reviewing what Matthew has written in the four chapters preceding the Sermon on the Mount.

- He opened by offering a genealogy explaining how Jesus is in the family line of the Jewish people’s beloved and revered King David.
- He described the birth of Jesus and a journey of wise men seeking to honor this child born to be king of the Jews.
- He described the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist who announced that the advent of God’s promised savior was imminent.
- Matthew wrote that Jesus went to John to initiate his public ministry by submitting to the ritual of baptism.
- Immediately after that Jesus went into the wilderness for a temptation-filled, soul-searching time of reflection to decide how to carry out his mission of proclaiming God’s unconditional love.

- After forty days Jesus returned to civilization and immediately called four fishermen to work with him: Peter and Andrew, James and John.

All that is in just the first four chapters of Matthew's gospel.

It's at this point that Matthew wrote that Jesus took notice of the crowds who were drawn to him because of his acts of preaching and healing and teaching. So Matthew wrote, "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them...."¹ I supposed Jesus could have stood at the bottom of the mountain and addressed the crowd spread out before him as if in an amphitheater. But by saying Jesus "went up the mountain" Matthew may have been trying subtly to suggest a parallel between Jesus ascending that mountain and Moses, a patriarch of the Jewish people, who ascended Mount Sinai to receive enlightenment from God. And while we would expect a public speaker to stand before his audience as I'm standing before you, it was typical for a Jewish teacher or rabbi to sit while teaching and commenting on scripture.

Matthew wrote that after Jesus sat, his disciples came to him. "The disciples" can't refer to the twelve apostles because at this point in Matthew's gospel Jesus has only called the four: Peter and Andrew, James and John. So the disciples – the students – were everyone in the crowd who wanted to hear what Jesus would say. And since Matthew was going to the trouble of writing this account some forty to fifty years after the fact, Matthew presumed that *his* readers were, in effect, also part of the crowd of expectant disciples eager to listen and learn. So though we are separated by many miles and many generation from the original hearers and readers of the gospel who Matthew envisioned, you and I are part of that "crowd" that has gathered to hear and be instructed by Jesus.

Earlier I mentioned that the first part of the Sermon on the Mount consists of nine statements beginning with the pronouncement "Blessed are those..." These sayings are known today by the title "The Beatitudes." That title comes from "*beati*," the first word of each saying as it appeared in a Latin translation from the late fourth century.² Matthew didn't invent the beatitude formula, nor did Jesus. The literary form of a beatitude goes back to sacred and secular writings of Old Testament times.³ "Blessed" means "fortunate," "in a privileged situation," "well-off," or "full of honor." Although "blessed" is sometimes translated as "happy," "the opposite of 'blessed' is not 'unhappy,' but 'cursed,'"⁴ so "happy" is probably not the most helpful translation.

The Beatitudes surely must have sounded strange, perhaps even silly, to that audience on the hillside. In announcing the blessedness of the underdogs, Jesus reverses the general value system of his world where the powerful and wealthy have all the advantages and the poor and lowly have virtually no hope of improving their lot. What Jesus proclaimed was the opposite of people's experience in their daily lives:

- People who are in mourning are *fortunate*?
- People who are meek and get pushed around are going to end up *on top*?

But Jesus wasn't imparting "practical advice for successful living." These beatitudes don't "describe nine different kinds of good people who get to go to heaven, but are nine declarations about blessedness, contrary to all appearances, of the [believing] community living in anticipation of God's reign."⁵ Jesus was prophetically declaring what it is like when God rules

¹ Matthew 5:1-2 New Revised Standard Version

² Malina, Bruce J., and Rohrbaugh, Richard L., *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, 47.

³ See *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII: Matthew-Mark*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 176b.

⁴ *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII: Matthew-Mark*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 177a.

⁵ *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII: Matthew-Mark*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 178a

our hearts. Jesus spoke “as if” – “Here’s what the world will know when God’s ways become our ways.”

- Even those who mourn and grieve will know the comfort of God.
- Even those who suffer mistreatment and discrimination will know that God stands with them in their suffering.
- Even those who are ignored and overlooked will know that God’s all-encompassing love embraces them.

Notice how the beatitudes begin in the present tense – “Blessed are those who [something]...” – but then for the most part conclude in the future tense – “...for they will [something].” By the present tense Jesus describes the situation of his audience then and now. No, not everyone is meek, but in that crowd (and in *this* crowd) there certainly are some who are meek. Certainly there are some who are in mourning, perhaps for a recent loss, or for one in the past whose pain is still potent. As a community of faith, together we are people who long for spiritual strength; we are people who mourn; we are people who are meek, people who hunger and thirst for the ability to do what is right. We are people who desire to show mercy and forbearance, people who desire to bring peace to conflicted situations. All of us are not all that, but each of us brings to our collective life as a faith community a part of the qualities of God’s kingdom.

Starting each beatitude in the present tense, Jesus concludes each beatitude by describing how our community of faith *will* embody God’s plan in our world: we *will* find comfort; we *will* receive power to accomplish what we can’t do on our own; we *will* be guided to do what is right in God’s eyes, even being recognized as “children of God” and even seeing God in what results from our actions and attitudes. The beatitudes acknowledge our present predicament and assert a future hope, a promise that what God desires *will* come to pass not according to our plan but in God’s time.

So what does it mean for us because Jesus has pronounced these blessings, these beatitudes to the generations of the faithful including us here today? In humility and gratitude we acknowledge our challenge and opportunity to rededicate ourselves. You see, individually and even as a congregation our lives have been characterized by any manner of shortcomings and imperfections and false starts and distractions of self-interest. Nevertheless, we rededicate ourselves to being a community of faith striving to embody the way of Jesus for the world to see... and follow. As the subjects of his blessing statements – his beatitudes – Jesus is forming us into a people embodying the Kingdom of God for the world. Jesus accepts us as we are so that by God’s grace we will grow closer to what God would have us be.