

In Response to Gracious Love 2020
 Matthew 5:1-10, 14-16 Matthew 28:16-20

Matthew 5:1-10, 14-16 (NRSV)

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, saying: ³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹⁴"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV)

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In an email, a pastor described being asked to help someone,
 a stranger, who came by and needed \$50 to help cover his rent.
 So as requested, the pastor wrote him a check for the \$50.

Sometime later the bank called that his account was overdrawn,
 because, it seems that the man had altered the check to \$550.
 In his email, my friend wondered if Jesus would say,
 "blessed are you if someone cheats you while trying to help them."

We read, blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn,
 who hunger for righteousness, the pure in heart and the reviled...
 ... **but what is so blessed about being poor in spirit?**
 ... **about being in mourning, being meek or persecuted?**

Are not the merciful and meek, really just easy marks & pushovers?
 In this world, we don't read many success stories or rewards
 going to the righteous, to the meek and pure in heart,
 but rather more often we see them
 getting stomped & trampled by the selfish & strong.

Peacemakers?, those who take a stand against injustice ...
 ... mostly we see them getting flamed and attacked
 on Facebook, Twitter and other social media.

What are we to make of the Beatitudes, we who live in the real world?
Was Jesus just talking about
some idealistic fantasyland that chooses to ignore reality?

The Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard once remarked,
how can we even read the Beatitudes with a straight face?,
for we all know full well that the world doesn't work like that.

Some have suggested that these inspiring words of the Beatitudes
are truthful, but that they just don't apply to us **yet**,
and that Jesus was really describing how it will be
much later in the KOG after the 2nd coming of Christ.

Meaning that Jesus spoke these inspiring and hopeful words
mostly to whet our appetites for what is to come in the end
by offering words of hope for someday in the sweet by and by.

But that interpretation is not consistent with the Greek,
Jesus is very specifically using the present active-tense,
which according to the rules of Greek grammar,
he cannot be describing some ideal distant future ...
... the language simply does not allow for that interpretation.

Others have suggested that maybe Jesus was giving us instructions
something like a roadmap toward social and cultural progress.

So by Christians acquiring political power & sufficient influence,
the Church should work toward the **perfection of humanity**,
and through moral and ethical authority, change the world...

... and over time we can eventually force these words **to become true**
by working to cure social ills, violence, greed and injustice,
and so reform this world to become **heaven on earth.**

That is how President Woodrow Wilson, a Presbyterian elder
interpreted this Beatitude passage from the Sermon on the Mount.

But if you follow current events or reflect on modern history,
clearly our world is not less violent, more merciful and just,
our culture's not coming any closer to living out the Beatitudes.

In addition that interpretation is not consistent with
the way Jesus spoke and carried out his life and ministry,
for nowhere does Scripture suggest that Jesus ever attempted
to overthrow the cruelty and injustice of the Roman Empire
by bringing about **political and social reformation.**

Indeed, we see that Jesus was quite careful and intentional
not to be perceived in any way as a political or earthly king
or in any way trying to bring about any agenda driven by politics.

**Jesus kept his focus on God and teaching faithful discipleship
in response to the Lord's gracious love, mercy and truth...**

i.e. ... love God with all your heart, mind and strength,
and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

**So what are we to make of these words that Jesus spoke,
the Beatitudes, as we find within the Sermon on the Mount?**

I find a helpful clue in the word, 'blessed', itself.

Some of the newer translations use 'happy' or 'fortunate',
but I think that is far too fuzzy, a very weak translation.

Blessed is far more than just feeling nice or privileged.

The blessed that Jesus was talking about
is being at peace within God's will, purpose and intention.

It's not about how we become a Christian, **but how grace is lived,**
and what it looks like to be on the track toward the righteous path.
toward the blessed life and living God intends for us.

It is living in tune or in harmony with God's way, call and reign.
Blessed is choosing to respond to God's grace, call and purpose,
in sharp contrast to following the selfish & greed of this world.

That means the Beatitudes are intended to describe what
a life of grace looks like when we are faithful disciples
and stand courageously against the greed & ways of this world.

**Yet isn't it a fair question to ask, how?,
and why would we possibly want to do that?**

The words Jesus spoke back then were incredibly shocking & radical
and totally completely against the ways & values of Roman world...
... just as, if we listen and take them seriously ourselves,
then we will find ourselves in total opposition to the ways,
to the values, beliefs and goals of those living around us.

And I can think of only one reason why I would want to do that,
because Jesus said so ... and because I have received God's grace,
that therefore I want to follow Jesus. **That's it.**

I can think of no other reason to put myself at odds with the world.

Now here is the Good News in this,
it's not intended as something to be achieved by our own efforts,
it's absolutely, a Holy Spirit driven process from within.

The Beatitudes describe what our life and living look like
when we do and when we have submitted to God's rule in our lives...
... the way we choose to live in response to God's grace and Presence.

The Beatitudes are not Jesus giving us advice and instruction
on how to get along well and succeed in this broken world,
but rather their purpose,
along with God's Holy Spirit and Word, is **to change us,**

to develop Christian character in us by enlarging our discipleship
as we learn to trust and let God be our strength, wisdom & guide,
to pattern our lives and attitude upon the Beatitudes
because filled with the Spirit, we walk with the Lord.

When I think back along my own spiritual journey,
in particular those amazing moments when my faith seemed to surge,
it has been those times when the stark truth and reality
of God's precious love, compassion and abiding mercy,
have unexpectedly become indescribably real and clear to me.

It's been when God's **grace has overwhelmed me** and lifted me
in some new and wonderfully powerful and significant way –
the realization that its depth, scope & transforming power
extends far beyond anything that I thought possible...
... a blessing so much more than anything I had previously imagined.

It's not been anything that I could have caused or accomplished,
but it's all been God's gracious revelation and kindness,
that has called for some kind of faith response from me...
... and that is what brought about changes in my behavior & attitude.

It is when we see and recognize God's unending & awesome love for us
that we are empowered with desire to reflect that grace & truth
by living more and more in accord within God's love and will...
...& that can be very noticeable against worldly greed & selfishness.

The other passage from Matthew that we read
comes at the end of the miracle and teaching ministry of Jesus...
... when he's with his disciples for the last time,
on a mountaintop just before he ascends to the Father.

On the mountain, as disciples were commissioned to serve, vs. 19-20.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

“Go” – that is an action word, get up and do,
get active and commit to making something happen.

“make disciples of all nations”, that is the task, our task.

For three years the disciples traveled and lived with Jesus,
listening, observing, absorbing and learning from him,
while growing in their faith and commitment,

learning to see the world more like the way Jesus did ...

... with grace, compassion, and determination
that reflects the gracious nature of God...

...and after Pentecost, those same disciples did change the world.

The disciples’ mission and task was to go and make more disciples,
by passing along all that Jesus had taught and shown them,
and for their lives to reflect and proclaim boldly
the Good News of the Gospel’s invitation of grace,
to an intimate and authentic relationship with God.

Their task, **make them one of you**, and pass it down through the ages,
for that is the call and mission of the Church of Jesus Christ.

But it isn’t something we’re expected to accomplish on our own,
rather it’s about cooperating & participating with the Spirit,
for if we are following Jesus, in thought, word and deed,
then surely that grace will leak out and overflow into the world.

When I worked in Washington DC, I rode in with a carpool,
and met my ride each morning at a strip-mall near a bakery.
The wonderful smells wafting out the open door where I stood
made going in to get a sack of fresh, warm doughnuts irresistible.

I believe that when we respond and obey God’s grace and call,
when we cooperate and allow the Spirit to work through us,
blessings, delight and joy will naturally follow and flow...

... and that such a life of authentic faith and discipleship
is just as irresistible as a sack of fresh, warm doughnuts.

A disciple is not simply a convert to our flavor of theology,
nor just a practitioner or consumer of religious programming.

**A disciple is one who follows trying to become more like Jesus,
which means intentional and continuing prayer and effort
to grow in faith & learning to live out God's gracious love,
which happens within faith community that supports such a journey.**

Conversion, or accepting Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior
is just the beginning, it's the place & time where faith begins.
Faithful discipleship is about helping that faith grow
into a more authentic and intimate walk with our God...
... which is the true task and calling of the Church...

... that is, to provide an environment and spiritually healthy ethos,
that invites people into a deeper relationship with Jesus
and encourages and helps toward more faithful discipleship.

It is when we see and recognize God's unending & awesome love for us
that we are empowered with desire to reflect that grace & truth
by living more and more, in accord within God's love & will.

Yes, it's really that simple. It's difficult, but not complicated.

God wants us to know him, to walk and talk with and enjoy him,
to have a relationship with him as we journey through life,
to know that we are uniquely created, precious & loved,
and to live our lives as those who are loved by God.

**So what does God really want from you? How can you please God?
How does experiencing God's gracious love change how we live?
And does Christ emanate from my life, his light shine through me?**

Those are all excellent questions to ponder,
as we approach **the Lord's Table of grace and community** today.