

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
4th Sunday after Epiphany  
January 29, 2017

### **Pursuit of Blessedness**

1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

You may have heard about the first-grade teacher  
who presented her students with the first half of a well-known proverb  
and asked them to come up with the second half.  
You've got to love the way the 6-year-old mind works.

So, let's see if you can complete a few of these proverbs,  
and then I'll tell you what the first graders came up with.

Strike while the...	...bug is close.
You can lead a horse to water, but...	...how?
Don't bite the hand that...	...looks dirty.
You can't teach an old dog new...	...math.
An idle mind is...	...the best way to relax.
A penny saved is...	...not much.
Laugh and the world laughs with you, cry...	and you have to blow your nose.
Children should be seen and not...	...spanked or grounded.

These are funny because we already know how the proverb is supposed to go  
and the answers of the children surprise us.

Today, in Matthew's Gospel,  
we have heard another set of proverbs that surprise us by their endings:  
the Beatitudes.

These don't make us laugh so much as look sideways at Jesus and say, "What?"

Blessed are the... poor in spirit?  
Blessed are those... who mourn?  
Blessed are you when... you are persecuted?

Now, these don't surprise us as much as they should  
because we've heard them all our lives.

But really, how can this be anything but nonsense?

If being blessed means being spiritually impoverished, or mournful, or persecuted,  
most of us might rather pass!

But Jesus wasn't making a joke.

This is what Jesus taught to his disciples,  
and it is the Word we have received from the Lord today.

What could it mean?

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In the Hebrew scriptures, beatitudes generally come in two varieties:

those that **bless God**,

such as the Jewish prayer begins, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God...”

and those that **bless human beings**.

as in Genesis when Leah says,

“Happy (or Blessed) am I! For women will call me happy!”

and In Psalm 1,

“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked.”<sup>1</sup>

These make sense because blessedness is usually associated with happiness, with joy, and prosperity.

In the Old Testament the basic idea was,

if you lived right, you were blessed.

Being blessed meant you received earthly, material things:

a good wife, many children, abundant crops,

riches, honor, wisdom, beauty, good health, and so on.

A blessed person had more things and better things than an ordinary person.

“Matthew uses a Greek word here

that had come to refer to the elite, the upper crust of society, the wealthy people.

It referred to people whose riches and power

put them above the normal cares and problems and worries

of the lesser folk —

the peons, who constantly struggle and worry and labor in life.

To be blessed, you had to be very rich and powerful.”<sup>2</sup>

But Jesus declares blessed those who are in extremely undesirable states.

In the first four Beatitudes,

Jesus declares that those who are most unfortunate in this world

are actually blessed —

the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, and those who are starved for justice.

In the next three Beatitudes

he promises rewards for those who join God

in alleviating the suffering of those described in the first four -

the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers.

And finally, in the last two Beatitudes,

blessing for those who, having joined in ministries of mercy in Jesus’s name,

find themselves persecuted

and thrust into the company of the poor ones in the first four.

This is a strange understanding of blessedness, to be sure.

It makes us think that perhaps biblical blessedness

does not refer to “happiness” in the sense of a subjective feeling,

but “blessedness” in the sense of an objective reality apart from any feelings.  
This would certainly help in understanding the second beatitude,

*Blessed are those who mourn*

which otherwise could accurately be rephrased into the nonsensical

“Happy are those who are not happy.”

But if we’re talking about a God-ordained reality, rather than just a human feeling,  
then we can say that

whether the poor in spirit or the meek or the persecuted *feel happy* or not,  
they are nonetheless *blessed* in God’s eyes and in God’s plan.

Somehow, according to Jesus,

the elite in God's kingdom, the blessed ones in God's kingdom,

are those who are at the bottom of the heap of humanity

living in very unhappy circumstances.

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Now this is hard for us.

In America, our dream of the good life involves “the pursuit of happiness.”

Some succeed in that pursuit, others are thwarted and fail miserably.

But we consider the pursuit of happiness to be basic to human life.

Now there is nothing particularly unbiblical in the pursuit of happiness

as long as the pursuit is done humbly, with justice and mercy for others.

But what Jesus tells his disciples here

is that *happiness* is not necessarily a sign of being blessed by God.

In fact, if we judge a blessing by its cover, we’re likely to get it wrong.

The key to understanding the blessings offered in Jesus’s beatitudes, it seems,

is that they all have to do with the coming kingdom of heaven,

the kingdom that is already near at hand in Jesus,

but has not yet fully arrived.

**The blessings of the Beatitudes have to do with our relationship with God,**

and God’s care for us in these in-between times,

when Jesus has come, but the kingdom is not yet fully established.

They encourage us to live humbly, according to God’s justice and mercy,

even if we must suffer for it.

**The pursuit of blessedness may not always make us happy in this life,**

**but it will bring us in line with God’s will for the world,**

**and God will reward us when the kingdom comes in its glory.**

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So Jesus's Beatitudes are **statements of reality** -  
reality not because they are obvious,  
but because Jesus, the Son of God, declares them to be reality.  
And they are meant to comfort us  
when we find ourselves in these unfortunate circumstances.

But they also have an **imperative** force:  
the Beatitudes call us to a way of life.

How are we to live if we want to follow Jesus?  
By being poor in spirit - that is, humble before God.  
By being meek, not seeking to exercise power over others.  
By yearning and striving for justice.  
By showing mercy.  
By being pure in heart - that is, single-hearted in devotion to God.  
By working for peace.

The beatitudes are a call to holy living,  
and an assurance that when all is said and done,  
we will be the happy recipients of God's blessing.

That is, if we live in the way Jesus shows us, we will...  
enter the kingdom of heaven,  
inherit the earth,  
receive mercy,  
be filled with good things,  
be comforted,  
and we will see God...  
we will see God!

There's a story of an old Rabbi who said to his young student,  
"In olden days there were men who saw the face of God."  
"Why don't they any more?"  
the student asked.  
"Because," said the old man,  
"nowadays no one stoops so low."

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So, now, what of the pursuit of happiness?

Ronald McNair was one of the astronauts on the Space Shuttle Challenger in 1986 which, as you'll recall, exploded shortly after takeoff, killing all 7 of the crew.

Several years ago I heard an interview with McNair's brother.

He spoke of their growing up in Lake City, South Carolina in the 1950's. One day, 9-year-old Ron, unbeknownst to his parents or his brother, decided to walk the one mile from their house to the public library - public, but not so public if you were black.

As he walked around the library, he drew quite a few incredulous looks. When he approached the circulation desk with his books, the librarian was scowling at him.

"You *know* this library isn't for colored folk," she said.

"Well," said Ron, "I'd like to check out these books."

She tells him if he doesn't put the books down and leave she will call the police.

So little Ron propped himself up there on the counter and said "That's fine, I'll wait."

So in walk these two big, burly white police officers and ask "Where's the disturbance?"

The librarian points to this little, black, bespectacled 9-year old standing at the counter.

Meanwhile the librarian had also called Mrs. McNair to tell her to come take her son out of the library.

Ron's mother had walked the mile to the library, praying the whole way, "Lord, don't let them put my son in jail."

So she walks in and asks what seems to be the problem, and the librarian says,

"Your son wants to check out these books, but you know we don't serve colored people."

Then comes the surprise:

this big white South Carolina policeman said to the librarian, "Ma'am, why don't you just let him take the books home?"

Mrs. McNair promised that her son would take care of them and return them on time.

And so the librarian, begrudgingly, relented.

Mrs. McNair said to her son, "Ron, what do you say?"

Ron looked at the librarian and said, "Thank you, ma'am!"

Ron when on from there to graduate magna cum laud from college,  
earn a PhD in physics from MIT,  
receive three honorary doctorates, a score of commendations  
and become an American astronaut.

And in 1984, in a successful shuttle flight,  
Ronald McNair became the second African American to make in into space.<sup>3</sup>

Now...who is blessed in this story?

The white woman who enjoyed the status of being white  
and having a comfortable job?

The black boy who was nearly denied access to learning?

The police officer who, from whatever motive, had mercy on the little boy,  
and may have suffered ridicule for it?

The mother, who surely feared for her children's safety  
and not just on that day?

Ronald McNair when he was accepted into the space program?

Or what about those who mourned Ronald McNair's tragic death  
on the fateful day of the Challenger launch?

It is surely true that Ron received great reward in this life,  
and experienced much blessing and happiness.

But for every story like the McNair's  
there are 10 more stories of families who suffered much worse persecution,  
without knowing the happiness Ron enjoyed.

But in the strange reality Jesus proclaims,  
they are blessed, too.

Theirs, too, is the kingdom of heaven.

They will be comforted.

They will be filled with God's justice.

They will see God.

And if we are willing to stoop low enough, we will, too.

*For God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise;*

*God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;*

*God chose what is low and despised in the world,*

*things that are not,*

*to reduce to nothing things that are,*

*so that no one might boast*

*in the presence of God.*

Such is the wisdom of God.

Such can be our wisdom, if we will accept it.

<sup>1</sup> Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes at CrossMarks.com, All Saints Day - Year ABC: *Makarios*

<sup>3</sup> [Astronaut's Brother Recalls A Man Who Dreamed Big](#), January 28, 2011 on NPR's Morning Edition, "Story Corps."