

An Ash Wednesday meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, February 13, 2013, dedicated to Jesus and the audacious of love and justice he struggled to bring into this world and our lives . . . May we one day be worthy to call ourselves “little Christy,” and always to the glory of God!

“Blessed Are You”
Matthew 5:1-12
(Part 1 of 8 in the series
“Blessed Are You!”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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There comes a time in your life when you say what you really need to say and do what you really need to do. When this happens, it is wise to choose a place that is appropriate for the gravity of the message that is deep in your heart. When you have been pondering what to say, you know you must choose a way and a place to say it as well as you possibly can.

Often the messages that we deliver in these times and places get stuck in our throats, in our guts and in the depths of our being. But these messages and these moments define not only who we are, but who we can become and who we hope to be.

It is in such a time and place as this that we meet with Jesus on the mountain. There he delivers the message that will change the designs and directions of his movement. We call all three chapters of this message the “Sermon on the Mount,” but the preamble, the pearl and the purpose of Jesus’ message can be found in the Beatitudes or “the Blessings.” Let’s take a look.

In the early chapters of Matthew, Jesus has been moving all over the Galilee Valley healing, teaching and preaching. He has been trying to set his course for the movement of love and justice. Suddenly, as Chapter 5 opens, he sees the multitude of people and flees. He goes into “retreat mode.” He heads for the hills. He takes his 12 disciples up on a mountain – far from the crowds, the clamor, the trials and tribulations of life with their families, friends and neighbors; far from the religious establishment, the merchants, the travelers, the fishermen and the Romans and their empire.

On the mountain, they are able to hear what he really has to say. It is an intimate setting. It is a quiet and peaceful setting. In this moment on the mountain, Jesus sits, breathes deep and shares his inmost thoughts with his inner-core of leadership. He gives them their “instructions” on the mount, as Orthodox Jew Pinchas Lapide puts it in his book on the sermon.

These instructions are very important – not only for the disciples – but for all who follow Jesus. Mahatma Gandhi says of the Sermon on the Mount: *“It is the sermon that has endeared Jesus to me. . . . But, the message in my mind has been distorted by the West. . . . (Now) much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount.”* (Pocket Gandhi series #6, Bombay, 1963, p. 43, 65).

In 1980, a young Capuchin-Franciscan priest named Michael H. Crosby, authored a book entitled *Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew’s Vision for the Church in an Unjust World*. It ran through 21 printings. It was hugely popular. Twenty-five years later, Fr. Crosby released a new revised edition. Among other things that he shared in the 2005 preface, he talked about 25 years of teaching and presenting on this book. From the beginning, almost no one in his audiences could name the nine blessings - and his audiences were mostly professional religious educators, priests and pastors. His point was this: Jesus lays out his plan for ministry in the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes are the foundation and the design for this prophetic ministry. We cannot build a house without a foundation. Similarly, we cannot build a Christian faith without a foundation either.

Crosby's point continues . . . while most of us can say the Lord's Prayer by heart, and many of us know some of Moses' 10 commandments (we are especially able to quote them when someone else breaks one), but every single one of us is hard-pressed to say the Beatitudes by heart (let's add this to our "to do" list this Lenten season).

What Jesus says in the Beatitudes should really matter to our daily walk of faith. We need to memorize the nine blessings and take them into our hearts. Here on the mountain, Jesus begins with blessing upon blessing. And then adds blessings to the blessings. He proclaims the blessedness of God's children and never wavers in offering even more blessings.

Now all too often when we have some important message to deliver to others (as I alluded to at the beginning of the sermon), our messages can be filled with judgment not blessing; self-reflection leading to honest disclosure – but not always coming around to blessings for the other – or even reflecting how God has blessed us! Our words can shake the foundations of the ones sitting before us – but all too often not in a positive way.

Not so with Jesus! Jesus' words shake the spiritual foundation of the world for ALL time. Like a tsunami of love, they shift the entire coastline. They change the very nature of the geography of faith.

Remember, Jesus is not only speaking to the people in 1st century Palestine. As true prophets do, he speaks to the whole world and ALL the inhabitants therein – for all time. His words are words of universal love and blessings. He has come that all things would be fulfilled in him. He has come to complete what God has started. And his words in the Beatitudes are neither a lecture nor a lesson. Instead, he offers a concrete response to people's needs, springing from his intensely hopeful and joyful spirit. Our rabbi of Nazareth is grounded in the prophetic vision found in Isaiah 35:3-4: *"I have come to strengthen the tired hands and revive the stumbling knees. I have come to say to the despairing hearts, be of good cheer. Do not be afraid. See, your God is coming!"*

And so it begins. Seated on the mountainside, Jesus brings the blessings of our faith to life. They are eloquent evidence of God's divine love. They are directed not simply to humanity in general, but especially toward the victims of human unkindness, toward those who have been bullied and beaten, the disadvantaged and forgotten ones, those who always come in last, who especially need comfort and affection. They are directed to the pain that people feel. They are directed to us – as Susan Thistlethwaite said – when we are waking at 4:30 a.m. because of the things in our lives that overwhelm us.

On a mountaintop, God is unveiled - speaking to us through the compassionate and unconditional love in Jesus Christ. May these words found in the Beatitudes offer each of us empowerment to face the hardships of life; a moral demand to follow the way of love; an encouragement for our times of trouble; and a call through this clear declaration - that our God loves the ones who have been brought down low.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Jesus.

Whoever trusts in these blessings, will be happy. Whoever trusts in these blessings sincerely and unshakably, is already happy. Whoever comes to trust in these blessings will come to be happy.

Today we begin this journey with Jesus to the cross. As we go, always remember that each one of us has been blessed to be a blessing. Blessed are you. Thanks be to God. Amen.