

# “Blessed”

**Micah 6:1-8; I Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 29, 2023, the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, dedicated to my mother, to my wife, to my four children and their partners and spouses and to my seven grandchildren and to every member of our amazing church staff at First Church who work tirelessly to bring love and justice; beauty and hope to the members and our neighbors near and far away and always to the glory of God!

**“Blessed”**

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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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In his late 20s, a Jewish peasant, a carpenter, descended from the hills of Nazareth, arrived at a crossroad in the Galilee Valley, took a right turn and walked forty miles east to begin his ministry beside a large lake named The Sea of Galilee.

Sometime in the third decade of the First Century, he began building his ministry team along the lakeshore. There were twelve at the core. They were a motley crew. Nine fishermen, a tax collector, a missionary from Armenia and one who’s only infamous claim was “traitor,” a title later changed to “betraye.” They had a certain special

fish-like odor for most part. They tried hard to follow. They gave it their all – though they really seemed to struggle with how best to follow their leader.

Beyond the twelve, there were thousands who loved to listen to him. They showed up when they could. They came for healings. They needed miracles in their lives. Like the twelve, they often struggled to pay attention and follow. In the end, almost every single one of them would abandon him rather than follow him. But, this Nazarene peasant filled with love, truth, justice and faith, this God-shining light, simply talked with them, taught, healed and led people to God's light, life and love. He was always pointing to God. People had a tough time getting this. But he never stopped showing them God.

There along the lakeshore, this man named Jesus spent three years teaching, preaching and healing like none before him and none to follow. When he preached, he sat down – as was the practice among First Century Palestinian rabbis.

Crowds gathered close around him to receive his blessings – to hear his words. Crowds always touched Jesus' heart. He saw each person in the crowd and knew what they needed. They needed what he had to share – love and grace; justice and mercy. He really opened his heart to them. That is why so many flocked to sit at his feet on the hillsides surrounding the lake. He spoke to their hearts and their concerns of daily life.

He was not the “preachy type.” He was not flamboyant like others who had come before him or those who would follow using his name. There was something qualitatively different about Jesus. He was real. He was sometimes funny but never phony. It was clear to all – opponents and supporters – in this man of Nazareth; ***THE*** spirit

**of God was on fire.** His soul was lit up and the light shining out of him was brilliant. When they left the hillsides and seaside, people began to call him names – a few in derogatory ways but mostly they called him “the Son of God.” Is it any wonder? Their words about him reflected the reality of God’s light they saw beaming out of him.

Just outside Capernaum, the northernmost seaside town, he preached his first recorded sermon. It was later written down and has been shared for the last 2000 years. We call it “The Sermon on the Mount.” But it was a more like a talk from the hilltop. There on the windswept hilltop west of town, he talked with the crowds about what really mattered. He pointed them to the stairway of the spiritual life. He called them “**blessed.**” He gave them the keys to the kingdom of God.

He said, “**you are blessed**” when you are poor in spirit. **You are blessed** when you have a deep concern about others. **You are blessed** when you surrender your will so that it becomes God’s will. **You are blessed** when you get up each morning and you are hungry and thirsty for doing the right thing. **You are blessed** when you have an attitude of compassion toward all people, and they end up wanting to share compassion with others, too. **You are blessed** when you are pure from the inside out. **You are blessed** when you don’t just talk “peace” but you BECOME peace to others.

We call these The Beatitudes. Jesus called them “*the way my followers must BE in this world.*” It was clear and remains clear to this day – **When you are blessed, you must be a blessing to others.**

He was clear. To be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, to be merciful, to be hungry and thirsty for righteousness, to be pure in heart and to BE peace all come at a cost. To follow him was not (and

is not to this day) a walk in the park. Rather, to follow Jesus is to carry a lit candle on a windswept hilltop.

He made very few promises. But one promise he made was this – when you follow him, you will face mockery and bullying. When you do the right thing – someone will spit in your face or assail your name for doing the right thing. In other words, to be a light-shining daughter or light-shining son of the Living God means someone is always trying to blow out your light. **This is the cost of discipleship.**

**Nevertheless** (and our faith is always lived in the “nevertheless”), we must do the right thing. And in our heart of hearts, we know when right is right. And in such “right doing,” through such vulnerability and beauty, God’s light will shine on you and in you and through you to others.

But, there is another side to being vulnerable and a light shining before God and in the presence of your neighbors. In doing the right thing, you will also experience the **joy of discipleship**. True joy comes in serving others and walking with God and Jesus reminded everyone, *“no one can take your joy from you.”*

These teachings – known now as “The Sermon on the Mount” – were about a total way of life faithfully lived out in God’s realm, built on the law of Moses, more than they were lessons reflecting good ideas to think about, or reflectively ponder or passively step around. To follow this path, to do as Jesus did, would lead to no less than life eternal.

The founder of Koinonia Farms, farmer and Greek theologian, pioneer of racial unity and biblical theology Clarence Jordan said

this about the Sermon on the Mount: *“This is not a sermon. These are the Lessons on the Mount. There’s a difference between a sermon and a lesson. A sermon is something you sleep through and tell the preacher you enjoyed. But, a lesson is something which is assigned and for which you are held responsible. You don’t sleep through lessons.”* (Clarence Jordan, *The Substance of Faith*, Association Press, New York, 1972, p. 62).

Let’s go with “lessons” – it will keep you awake and keep you honest. Often called the preamble of the “lessons,” the first 12 verses are still known as the Beatitudes. Called the “Be-Attitudes” by some, the “Happy Attitudes” by others, the “Blessings” by most, these **“Congratulations”** (which is the true translation of the word) are eight lessons (in Matthew) that set the virtuous course for the rest of the sermon, the stairway to heaven, if you will.

In Luke, the writer calls people blessed when they are poor. Matthew broadens his understanding by offering this blessing to those who are “poor in spirit.” With this, Matthew exposes those who are powerless over the shadow side of their lives. These poor in spirit have no ability to save themselves, no matter what their economic plight or economic success. Matthew’s words draw in all of humanity. No one can walk away from facing poverty of spirit. Although lack of money or economic resources may define the poor in spirit, it may not, as well. The poor in spirit are opposite of the proud in spirit. Whether economically or spiritually poor, Jesus clearly points out that the poor in spirit are those aware of their need for spiritual resources, and as such, they are open to welcoming God’s Heavenly Realm – on earth as in heaven.

The poor in spirit know they need God! They know they need what Jesus is offering! The poor in spirit want to go to the kingdom of

heaven. Let me rephrase that – the poor in spirit **NEED** to go to the kingdom of heaven.

Which is it for you – are you poor in spirit or proud in spirit? It seems like every single time our spirit gets puffed up with pride, God finds a way to humble us. We get the pride-filled wind knocked right out of us. We all need to be poor in spirit, but we all struggle with the shadow side of pride in spirit.

As for the other blessings – Do you weep with those who mourn? Are you humble in your heart? Are you merciful in your ways? Do you hunger and thirst for what is right and just in this world? Do you pray and seek each day to be pure in heart? Do you seek to be a peacemaker and not a divider of humanity? And finally, do you accept and embrace your blessings when you are reviled, and hated and even persecuted for standing up and speaking out and doing what is right in the eyes of God? If you can say “yes” to any of these eight questions, then you have honestly placed your feet on the stairway to heaven.

Maybe a simple place for each of us to begin would be to reflect upon the words spoken of Atticus Finch in *“To Kill a Mockingbird.”* It was said of Atticus that he was “as good a man at home as he was on the public streets.” Perhaps we could all claim this as a point of beginning to follow Jesus. Here is step one on the stairway to heaven.

We live in a world where peace seems far away – from the streets of Jesus’ homeland in Jerusalem and Jenin where 7 Israelis and 9 Palestinians were killed this week; to the streets of Memphis where Tyre Nichols cried out for his mother as he was beaten nearly to death by five police officers only die three days later; to the 45 mass shootings in the USA in the first 29 days of this new year – including

two in Columbus, one early this morning; to a vicious war in Ukraine now it is 12th month; we seem intent on being war-makers and carnage-makers – not peacemakers. This doesn't even begin to touch the wars within our hearts or in our families and between people on a daily basis. It feels like the Beatitudes do not matter, like the Sermon on the Mount never happened. It feels like our presence for and with one another in trial and rejoicing has lost its way in God's world.

Nevertheless, we are here. Perhaps we present a last vestige of hope. Here, like by the seaside in Galilee, we can come for comfort and reassurance of faith and hope. Here, in this Cathedral of Grace, this House of Hope, we can come together as a family of faith. Despite our differences, we cannot allow further divisions to separate us. Despite our different perspectives on life in our times and even in the church, we cannot abandon our commitment to God, to one another and to people in need in our time.

For the moment, let us be still and listen. Let us learn one lesson today. Let us follow Jesus. Let us do our best to live into the Blessings of God.

If you close your eyes and when you are still, you can hear the water lapping on the shoreline of the lake in Galilee. You can hear the soft voice of Jesus, commending us for the blessings we have known, for the blessings we have been for others, and the blessings we are growing into becoming.

We can hear the soft voice of Jesus saying, "You are Blessed... Now go and be a blessing to others." Amen.

