

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the peacemakers. It seems that for most people, even those who never go to church or read the Bible, these sayings of Jesus usually have some familiarity. As it is with familiar things, they can often lose their impact simply because they are no longer surprising or new. We get used to them and they risk becoming like wallpaper on the walls of our faith - it looks nice, the room might feel different if it was gone, but most of the time it goes unnoticed. We expect it to be there and it feels normal.

We also live in a very different context than the original hearers of these words. As Christians in the modern United States, we are not persecuted because of our beliefs. There is no war on Christianity in this country no matter what some people proclaim from their keyboards. We do not live in a place occupied by a corrupt and violent foreign power. We have a better scientific understanding of things like disease and mental illness and rarely attribute them to an individual's moral failings or demon possession. And, for the most part, we do not cast aside people who are, as the writer of Matthew's Gospel states "afflicted with various diseases and pains... epileptics and paralytics."

But that is not to say that we can't imagine the world in which Jesus ministered and taught. It might be difficult, but let's give it a try. Take a minute, close your eyes if you prefer, and imagine living in a time and place where the political leader was considered a god. Where political propaganda declared that people were healthier and happier because of the ruling administration, even though the facts proved otherwise. Imagine a world in which the power was held by the elite, the wealthy, and the corrupt and those at the top prospered on the backs of the poor. Imagine that you were told that your prosperity, your health, your status, was a result of how much you pleased or displeased God. Imagine that certain groups of people were perceived to be useless, a burden, or were used as scapegoats the poor living conditions that were really caused by the corruption and greed of the ruling class. Imagine living in a world that solved its conflicts with violence and domination, where egos and pride prevented people from

admitting mistakes, and where cries for punishment and retribution drowned out the cries for mercy and forgiveness. Maybe it's not that difficult to imagine after all.

Jesus is just beginning his ministry. You might remember that last week we read about Jesus experiencing temptations in the wilderness that showed the way he would live into his role as the Son of God. When we meet Jesus this morning he has called the first four of his disciples and they have followed as travels throughout the region of Galilee teaching, preaching, and healing people from all walks of life. Word is getting out about Jesus. There's something different about this guy and his message. Crowds of people have come to be healed in body and spirit. People living in that world we just imagined. People who were struggling with illness or disability. People who were grieving and in mourning. People who were poor in spirit meaning they were spiritually depleted, discouraged, despairing and feeling hopeless. People who were foolish enough to believe that peace and justice were the will of God, not domination and violent force. Jesus comes to them and says "I know that the powers of the world want you to believe that you are worthless and that it will always be this way. But I have come to tell you that you are beloved." You are beloved.

The traditional translation of this scripture text is Blessed are... I think that word warrants some attention because blessed has taken on a different connotation in modern times than what the original hearers of this text would have had. The Greek word that is translated as "blessed" is "makarios". To be makarios is to be held in divine favor, to be on the receiving end of God's grace. This is not a prosperity gospel that equates blessing with an easy life or lots of money or traditional measures of success. This is a blessing of God that says all of you, even those who have been told otherwise, are held close and loved by God.

Did you notice these blessings start with the present tense? Blessed **are** those who mourn. Blessed **are** those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These are not instructions or conditions of blessing. There is no direction to say therefore become meek, therefore become poor in spirit, therefore become mournful. In fact, the only directive in these blessings is to "rejoice and be glad." Why? Because the experience of

the present moment does not define the future. Yes, there is suffering now. There is grieving now. There is persecution and violence and corruption now. There is spiritual exhaustion and emotional despair now. AND God's grace is also present right now. And that same grace calls upon us to look forward with hope, faith, with imagination, to see a reality beyond the present moment. To believe it to be possible when we pray "may God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Jesus looks upon the people and proclaims what is already true. He proclaims a reality that they, and we, have been discouraged from believing. That God's blessings are not reserved for the elite and the powerful. They are for all people, including the ones whom the elite and powerful treat as pawns or cogs in their machine. God's blessing is upon us - each and every one of us. God created us and calls us beloved.

And just when you thought the story was over, because that's where the reading ends for this week, Jesus goes one step further. In the next few verses Jesus says that not only are they blessed and beloved, but they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world! Salt of the earth, not in the modern sense of being simple, honest, and humble, although those attributes may also be true. But salt of the earth as something precious and valued that brings out flavor and preserves things. Salt of the earth - people who bring out the best in others, who preserve their humanity when the world threatens its decay. Light of the world – people who help illuminate the path forward. People through whom God's light and love shine.

Being beloved and blessed is not a status you have to earn.

Blessed is simply who you are.

Amen.