



# SAINT LUKE'S

4TH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY  
YEAR A

MICAH 6:1-8  
1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31  
MATTHEW 5:1-12  
PSALM 15

A SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM OGBURN

JANUARY 29, 2017

Today on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, we hear the opening passages of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which is better understood as Jesus' Discourse on Discipleship. Jesus sits down and starts teaching his disciples what it means to follow him. He opens with that we commonly call the Beatitudes, a list of blessings. I think we have trouble hearing the word *blessing* today, because we have misconstrued blessing to connote privilege, prosperity, or even just sheer luck. Rather, blessing is about nearness to God. As a priest, when I bless something, I am asking God to come closer. We set certain objects or places apart as holy and no longer profane by asking God to drive out what is unholy. We consecrate water, bread, and wine in sacraments because they are outward signs of God's presence and nearness to us. We bless people to drive out what is unholy in us and to usher in God's goodness, holiness, grace, and love.

Bearing that in mind, how do you hear the Beatitudes differently?

~ *Near to the heart of God* are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

~ *Near to the heart of God* are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

~ *Near to the heart of God* are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

~ *Near to the heart of God* are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

~ *Near to the heart of God* are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

~ *Near to the heart of God* are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

~ *Near to the heart of God* are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

~ *Near to the heart of God* are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

~ Near to the heart of God are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

In hearing this, I see the beatitudes, not as a Christian checklist, but rather as an outline of what matters most to the heart of God. These are God's concerns for the world. It is no surprise then that Jesus, who is in perfect union with God, would live his life like the Beatitudes he preaches. The Beatitudes are a reflection of the person of Jesus and a divine revelation of the heart of God.

On the other hand, the wisdom of the world tells us the opposite of what Jesus tells us. Hear what the world says is wise:

- ~ Blessed are those who are not dependent on others
- ~ Blessed are those who are self-reliant
- ~ Blessed are those who help themselves
- ~ Blessed are those who pull themselves up by their bootstraps
- ~ Blessed are those who put themselves first
- ~ Blessed are those who build themselves up by tearing others down
- ~ Blessed are those who exploit privilege
- ~ Blessed are those who have power.

**God calls these "Alternative Beatitudes."** This is what the world calls wise.

But as Paul says in today's Epistle, "The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." As Christians, we proclaim Christ Crucified. Jesus, in selfless love, emptied and humbled himself – even to the point of death on the cross.<sup>1</sup> It makes no sense to the world that what is humble and meek would have power over death. It makes no sense that poor in spirit would inherit the kingdom of God. To be poor in spirit does not mean to be weak or to be sad, but rather it means to give up on going our own way. To be poor in spirit is the result of repentance.<sup>2</sup> Being poor in spirit means turning away from going our own way and reorienting ourselves towards God and this aligns with the coming reign of God. To be poor in spirit means to lose ourselves to God in Christ because we belong to him. We are in Christ by God's action. And we are bound together.

I find it particularly poignant and quite remarkable that, in Greek, the forms of the Beatitudes are plural, not singular. Notice, it isn't "blessed is she who mourns..." or "blessed is he who makes peace." Rather, it is "Blessed are they." Jesus is not only teaching us how to live as individuals, but he is showing us how to live in community. It is less about personal piety, and more about our collective lives and how we together as the Body of Christ may have a godly effect on the world. What we do and how we live matters to God.

Those taking on the *Bible Challenge* will recall recently reading the Beatitudes on Day 5. In his reflection for that day in the *Bible Challenge* about the Beatitudes, The Rev'd Dr Walter Bruggemann writes, "The Church faces two temptations: one is to give up the [our vocation to be different from the

world] and fade into the social landscape along with everyone else. The other is to separate from all the others to be safe, pure, and unvexed by social reality. Neither choice is faithful. Rather, [the followers of Jesus are] dispatched to be engaged in transformative, reconciling generosity, the only difference that finally matters.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul tells us in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians to consider our calling. Will we listen to the wisdom of the world or will listen to the heart of God? Will we be selfish hoarders or will we be agents of reconciliation? Will we build walls or will we build bridges? Will we cast people away or will we be havens of refuge? Will we walk our own way and just take care of ourselves? Or will we “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God?”<sup>4</sup> May we always seek to be close to the heart of God, who is the “source of [our] life in Jesus Christ,”<sup>5</sup> and may we live lives so transformed by the Gospel that our only boast may be in that of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Philippians 2

<sup>2</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 165.

<sup>3</sup> Marek P. Zabriskie, *The Bible challenge: read the Bible in a year* (Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement, 2012), Day 5.

<sup>4</sup> Micah 6

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:30





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