

Sermon: The ‘tudes
Text: Matthew 5:1-12
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Context: WWPC
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Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:1

A couple of weeks ago I was sitting in Gladfelter cafeteria on campus, enjoying my lunch when three staff members from the college’s IT department joined me.

Turns out they were in the process of hiring a new person to join their staff and they began to talk about the qualities they were looking to find in this new hire.

JT Wagner, the head of the department, finally weighed in and said that in the course of hiring many people over the years, he had learned to look for two things. He called them “The ‘tudes.”

“Aptitude and attitude,” he explained. “These are the two essential qualities I’m looking for. Everything else you can teach.”

I knew right then that JT had given me the title of this sermon because I also knew that the text for today was centered around the Beatitudes.

It’s tempting to say that the Beatitudes comprise a list of the ‘tudes that Jesus was looking for when inviting people to follow him, to join him in his campaign to build out the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven.

“the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers.”

If you’re Jesus and you’re looking for a team to help you realize your vision and fulfill your mission, you can certainly make the case that this is a list of admirable qualifications.

These two qualities, these two ‘tudes if you will, point to someone who is both tender-hearted with respect to the suffering of others (check), and tough-minded with respect to what is happening in the world around them (check). Everything else you can teach.

But I think that’s to misread this text a little bit. Because the Beatitudes are not about us. They’re about God.

Jesus himself makes this plain. This list of blessings does not give us the first words he speaks in the New Testament, but they are the opening words of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew, it’s the first sermon he preaches. It is by far the most famous he preaches.

Over the course of this sermon, and as we’ll see in the coming weeks, Jesus gives his listeners then, and he gives his followers today, some of the most startling ethical pronouncements, some of the most innovative spiritual practices the world has ever heard – almost as though they were conceived in heaven itself:

- Blessed are the peacemakers
- Be anxious for nothing, for remember the lilies of the field, and how God cares for them.
- Love your enemy.
- Judge not that you be not judged
- Our father who art in heaven...

If the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ Constitution, his Book of Order if you will, if this sermon is to be the foundation of his whole body of teaching, then the Beatitudes are its preamble. They set the stage for everything that’s about to follow.

And did you notice how this preamble starts? With this one word: blessed.

Blessed are you. Not, cursed are you if you do not believe the way I do. Not, you’re going to burn in hell if you don’t put a statue of the 10 Commandments outside your courthouse. Not, repent you bunch of miserable sinners.

No. None of that. His first words in his first sermon are words of blessing, not judgement. And he comes back to that phrase, to those words, again and again, like a refrain sung by angels, blessed are, blessed are, blessed are.

You'd think he was trying to tell us something. Except it's not that simple. The curious thing about this lovely declaration of blessings is that it has been edited.

The Beatitudes also appear in the gospel of Luke. But in Luke the first few are shorter. More focused. And they don't come in his first sermon, but in his second.

In Luke, Jesus preaches his first sermon in a synagogue, not on a hillside. In it, he declares that he has come to preach good news to the poor, and to set the captives free. In his second sermon he delivers on that promise.

Given that most of us in this room are not poor, or living as captives, it's worth pondering how someone in that context would hear this sermon. So, I'm going to ask you to close your eyes, if you're comfortable doing that, and come with me on a little journey. Imagine that you're living in one of the homeless camps here in Asheville. You suffered a devastating illness a few years ago, and without health insurance, the bills left you bankrupt.

Now you have to choose between feeding your children and paying your landlord. For you that's not even choice. So you live with your three kids in a tent by the river.

Despite living in the United States, you are now one of the most economically vulnerable people in the world. Not completely dissimilar from the original audience to whom Jesus preached this sermon.

Early one Sunday morning, Amy Cantrell from the Beloved Community arrives. She is joined by the mobile medical clinic, a ministry the members of the community have been trained to provide. As the team begins tending to cuts, cleansing infected sores and passing out energy bars, Amy opens her pocket Bible to the Gospel of Luke and reads these words:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.
“Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

She then goes on to tell you about the tiny homes the Community has built in East Asheville, and you're astonished to discover that you might be qualified to own one. You realize there are actually people in the world who are committed to making these promised blessings come true.

And you feel something rising in your heart, something you haven't felt in years. So long in fact that at first you can't even name what it is, until you finally recognize that it's hope you feel.

(Okay, you can open your eyes now.)

If you place yourself down in the shoes of the poor, it's easy to appreciate the power of these words, and why Luke kept them so cleanly focused on the poor and the hungry -- literally poor and literally hungry.

The question is why did Matthew change them? Why did he make them more focused on spiritual hunger? And what might that mean to us?

For better or worse, Matthew does not explain his decision. So we have no idea as to his motives.

Maybe it was because, as a tax-collector, he himself was not poor. He almost certainly did not have to choose between buying groceries for his family and paying his landlord.

But maybe he had also come to understand that money does not exempt you from suffering, or shield you from the blows or insulate you from the challenges life can dish out.

So let me invite you to close your eyes again. Now, take a moment to consider what's going on in the life of our country right now. Or, if you'd rather, consider what's going on in your life right now.

And, because this is a sanctuary, let me also invite you to remember that you're safe here. It's okay to let yourself feel whatever it is you've been feeling lately, whatever it is that you're feeling right now.

Maybe it's fear, or frustration or anger. Or helplessness, or even hopelessness. Maybe it's sorrow or grief. Maybe it's joy.

Whatever you may be feeling, I invite you now to imagine that Jesus himself walks through our doors, continues walking to the front of the sanctuary, climbs the steps up into the chancel, then climbs the steps up into the pulpit.

And these are the first words he says:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed be all God’s children.