

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Blessed and a Blessing”
The Rev. Joanne Blair
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Matthew 5:1-16

This week, we begin the third quarter in our study of Brian McLaren’s book, “We Make the Road by Walking.” For those of you following the book, you know that during the season of Lent this year, we will be concentrating on what is known as “The Sermon on the Mount” in the book of Matthew.

Since this is the first Sunday, I think it is appropriate to “set the stage” for the next few weeks by reviewing what has happened prior to today’s reading. The point of this, in Matthew, is to link Jesus to the Old Testament prophecy and already accept his authority.

Thus far, we have been assured that the genealogy of Jesus is from the line of David, and that Jesus was brought up in Nazareth. Jesus has been baptized, the Spirit of God is upon him, and a voice from heaven has claimed him as, “my Son, the Beloved.”

He has gone into the wilderness and been tempted by the devil, started his ministry in Galilee, called his first disciples, and been curing people with diseases and demoniacs.

Listen now for God speaking as we read Matthew 5:1-16.

In her book, “Gospel Medicine”, Barbara Brown Taylor reflects on the joys of childhood when she would stand on her head. “Trees grew down, not up,” she writes, “and the sky was a blue lawn that went on forever. For as long as I could keep my balance I could tap dance on it, while birds and clouds flew under my feet. My swing set was no longer and ‘A’ but a ‘V’ and my house seemed in danger of falling off the yard- just shooting off into space like a rocket- leaving a sidewalk lined with pansies that led to nowhere. I liked standing on my head because it made me see old things in a new way.”

Many parts of the Bible are considered to be “upside down”, as we hear of the “first being last”, etc. And this is certainly true in the Beatitudes. Jesus constantly reversed the general value system of the day... and, alas, the general value system of still today.

As Jesus went up the mountain, he sat down (as one did when they were going to teach), and his disciples sat around him. Jesus was speaking to his disciples and those others who would choose to follow him. As Jesus articulates God’s blessings, he is outlining the call to discipleship in relation to the character they should already have.

He also describes the costs in their lives, as well as in God’s future.

Beatitudes are not new to Jesus, or Matthew, or the New Testament. They are found throughout the Old Testament in the Wisdom and Prophetic writings. The Greek word used for blessed in today’s scripture is “mak-ar-ee-os”, which means: blessed, by extension fortunate, well-off, happy. “Mak-ar-ee-os” is not asking for something. It confirms that which already exists.

The Beatitudes are certainly not practical advice for successful living! Rather, they are prophetic declarations made on the conviction of the coming-and-already-present kingdom of God. They are not direct calls to action... rather, they are promises. And they are true, based on the authority of the one who speaks.

But how can we remain passive, when we have been blessed in such a way as this? We have been entrusted with a mission to the world.

At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has called only the first four of his disciples. As he is teaching them, he is teaching all who choose to follow him. And so, he is teaching us. We are expected to locate ourselves among the potential disciples, eavesdropping as Jesus declares: "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world."

Thus, as followers of Jesus, "We" are the salt of the earth and "We" are the light of the world.

We know that salt was a prized preservative before there was refrigeration. It was also used in ancient sacrifice... and, of course, still today it enhances the flavor of many foods.

Needless to say, salt was considered a small thing of great value. To be called the "salt of the earth" by Jesus is something special.

And, anyone lost in the dark appreciates the direction given by the smallest flicker of a candle. But we are not just to be guided by the light, we are to guide others. The light of God is within us, and we are to live in ways that testify to the glory of God. To be called the "light of the world" by Jesus is, again, something special.

But "something special" is not an award; not a recognition to brag about... not that which makes us better than someone else.

Rather, it is a call to mission. God has entrusted us to live God's message as disciples of Jesus Christ. To humbly love and serve with thanks and praise to God.

Salt and light... such common, ordinary things which have the power to change everything with which they come in contact.

There are people who make the headlines for their service and dedication to God, and well they should. We could certainly stand to hear more of these stories! But there are also so many people who quietly just "live it." In the past month I have been so touched by the number of situations I have encountered with people in this very congregation who "just live it... just do it."

How uplifting it is to have to limit myself to just three examples!

I was concerned about someone who lives alone and has been struggling lately, worried that she was falling through the cracks... only to learn that someone from this church has taken it upon herself to repeatedly reach out to her, make sure her needs are being met, and know that she is not alone.

Someone else has taken it upon himself to consistently call some of our members who are not able to get

out, who may be struggling with various issues, and who feel that their world and circle of friends is shrinking. This has been going on for months and months.

Last week, one of our guests from SOS ended up here at the church (after SOS was over and gone), and one of our members (who already had to have been exhausted!) stayed with her... and her four children for the entire day. They camped out in the youth room for the day and he supposedly “worked” while caring for, supervising, and supporting them for the day.

These are just three examples.

No one asked any of these people to do what they are doing. They are just letting their light shine brightly. These people are salt and light. They are blessed. And they are a blessing.

Like basic salt and every day light, we are called to be useful, life-giving elements in this world. And we are called to give glory to God in the process.

Every thought we have, and every thing we do should be in praise and thanks to God.

Some of us are “luckier” than others in the ways of the world. We may have more money, or better health, and we often confuse this with blessings from God.

As understood in the Bible, happiness is the condition of being spiritually blessed. It is an inner assurance and confidence of God’s love, grace, and eternal care.

Each of us has the greatest blessing of all... the love and faithfulness of God. And that blessing is ours regardless of any trials we may be facing.

In the coming week I invite you to celebrate that blessing each and every day.

Start each day with the affirmation: “I am blessed.”

And then ask yourself, “How will I be a blessing to someone else today?”