

## **November 8, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)**

### **Matthew 5:1-12**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

<sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

### **This is the Word of the Lord | Thanks be to God**

#### **Message: Just Peace**

For those of you who went to Sunday school as children,  
did you have to memorise the Beatitudes?

Where I went to Sunday school as a little girl, we certainly did.

One of the other girls, the youngest of the group,

really cute, carrotty-red hair,

couldn't quite manage the word "beatitude"

and she called them beauti-tudes instead.

And you know, she may have been onto something:

the beatitudes are beautiful attitudes to have, beautiful ways to live,  
following Jesus' example and teachings.

And they are the beginning lines of Jesus' greatest teaching message,  
the Sermon on the Mount.

Although we have the sermon written down for us,

and can read it for ourselves,

I think, like most great sermons by great preachers,

you lose a little just reading it on your own

after the fact.

So let me set the scene for us, so we can imagine ourselves

into that crowd, that congregation, that first heard Jesus preach.

Picture a whole lot of people, of every sort:

men, women, children; all occupations and vocations;

rich and poor, slave and free,

people who had followed Jesus

from place to place as he travelled.  
 And now, on a ridge of hills northwest of town,  
 with a magnificent view of the Sea of Galilee,  
 Jesus sits down – as was usual for a teacher in those days –  
 and he opens his sermon  
 with this simple, beautiful set of sayings.  
 Now, any orator will tell you that,  
 to make sure everyone listens and takes in what you're saying,  
 you need a hook to pull them in;  
 a story, or something provocative,  
 or something that catches on their own experiences,  
 that makes them feel like you're speaking  
 just to them, even if they're part of a crowd.  
 And that is just what Jesus does.

He speaks eight blessings to the crowd.  
 The temptation is to see the Beatitudes  
 as cause-and-effect statements:  
 if you are poor, then you will be blessed,  
 if you mourn, then you will be blessed,  
 if you are persecuted, then you will be blessed.  
 And that might indeed hook people in...  
 ...but if we put it that way,  
 it almost sounds like Jesus is trying to  
 sell them something.  
 And how comforted would someone who is grieving be,  
 by this statement?  
 You feel bad now,  
 but you're blessed and you'll be comforted.  
 Remember that Jesus is speaking to real people.  
 And what he is doing with these opening statements  
 is putting into words the tension that exists  
 for those who trust God,  
 but face actual pain, poverty, emptiness,  
 and all manner of brokenness in their lives.  
 What Jesus is doing is describing what's true about their lives,  
 making each one feel like he is speaking just to them,  
 and answering the broken, frustrated parts of their lives  
 with the hope and blessing offered in the kingdom of heaven.

So blessed are the poor in spirit, Jesus says, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
 What does it mean to be "poor in spirit?"  
 It's mean you've lost all your illusions about life for a time.

The poor in spirit are demoralized, dejected;  
 they've lost all hope for the future.  
 In the eyes of the world, the poor in spirit are the lowest of the low,  
 because they've been knocked down so many times or so hard,  
 that they can't get themselves back up again.  
 Poverty of the spirit makes us realise like nothing else  
 that we have no refuge but God,  
 and that we need no refuge but Him.  
 And that is true wealth.  
 The kingdom of God,  
 and the wholeness and abundance that can be found there,  
 are made for the poor in spirit.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
 There's no stoicism or stiff upper lip to be found  
 when it comes to Jesus' grief.  
 He never lacked emotion.  
 He wept openly at the death of his friend;  
 among his final words was a loving request  
 for someone to take care of his mother.  
 And here, he tells us two truths:  
 we will mourn, and we will be comforted.  
 We are not told to bury our grief, or to learn a lesson from loss;  
 we are simply promised that when we grieve,  
 we will do so enfolded  
 in the compassionate and comforting embrace  
 of the God who dreams of the day  
 when he will wipe every tear  
 from our eyes.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
 The meek are not the weak, or the mousey.  
 To be truly meek  
 – gentle to all, willing to put God and others ahead of ourselves –  
 that takes great strength and great sacrifice.  
 Trusting God's plan and following Jesus  
 could never be signs that we are weak.  
 But we live in a world that tells us otherwise,  
 and distracts us from our true inheritance.  
 At every turn, we're told to make our happiness happen now,  
 without much thought of other people.  
 But we are children of God.  
 And here, Jesus promises us  
 that our inheritance is already secure.

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

Righteousness – and its frequent companion, justice –

are old, old words taught to us by God.

When we hear the word “justice,”

we may think of a criminal getting the punishment  
he deserves.

But in the ancient language of God’s people,

justice means something more like fairness and equity.

When we hear “righteousness,”

we may have negative associations  
from the idea of “self-righteousness,”

but even if we hear it as a positive thing,

we probably think in terms of good behaviour.

But it means something more like living in right relationship,

and treating everyone with fairness, generosity, and equity.

Righteousness is the active living-out of the concept of justice.

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness

– that’s a need we share with Jesus himself.

And that need will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Mercy does not fare any better today

than it did in the Roman province of Judea, two thousand years ago.

We live in a time of outrage and punishment,

and mercy is giving someone what they *don’t* deserve.

But mercy is not the absence of justice;

it’s simply the presence of forgiveness.

Because of Jesus, God has no outrage or punishment left for us.

God is not standing, ready with a long list of all our failures,

to explain why the mercy we thought we received

didn’t actually count.

Jesus saved us and made us right with God.

In Christ, we are forgiven and we are loved.

It is final and it is finished.

And so Jesus can then say, and we can happily hear:

blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

No longer an impossible standard to meet,

because, as is so often true on our Christian journey,

Jesus has already done the hard work for us.

We need only accept the gift of mercy,

and we can anticipate seeing God with joy.

And now we come to the end: blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.

As nice as peaceful feelings can be,  
we know that an emotional state doesn't last.  
We need something more.  
We need a peace with substance, strength, and staying power.  
We need the peace that comes from  
the wholeness of right relationship  
between us and God.  
We won't be able to make peace  
until the peace Jesus made  
begins to re-make us.  
In seeking peace, followers of Christ are blessed and so is the world around them.  
But not everyone will respond well to our peace-making.  
So Jesus offers assurance and comfort for us:  
blessed are the persecuted  
and those who are reviled and lied about for my sake,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
When the world offers indifference,  
or at times outright hostility,  
the truth of this last beatitude is that  
there is no suffering so great that Jesus cannot heal it,  
and there is no difficulty so trivial  
that his heart does not bear it with us.  
It would be unhealthy to be thankful we suffer.  
But Jesus teaches us that we can find blessing  
in the certainty that we are not alone in those moments.

So all that's a pretty incredible hook  
to get everyone paying attention and wanting to hear more!  
Like that long-ago crowd of real, ordinary people...  
...I suspect that each of us found  
our own experiences and our own truths  
spoken to by Jesus here, too.

The Beatitudes offer comfort amidst the difficulties we face.  
They speak into our experiences and the hard truths of our lives,  
and promise hope.  
But when we read the verses that follow the Beatitudes,  
we see that we are not meant to simply know this information.  
There's a powerful hint from Jesus  
that the message he's speaking is for more

than our comfort and consideration.

According to Matthew, this is what Jesus said next:

“You are the salt of the earth.

But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?

It is no longer good for anything,

except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world.

A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.

Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.

Instead they put it on its stand,

and it gives light to everyone in the house.”

We are called to be salt in a tasteless world,

shining cities on hills,

lamps uncovered and unobscured.

We are not meant to only take personal comfort from these beatitudes  
or simply to know them as information;

we are meant to proclaim them.

This message must be spoken and shared and lived,  
in real tangible ways.

And I wonder sometimes if we’ve lost sight of what an  
upside-down, counter-cultural view of the world  
these beatitudes really do offer us;

if the salt of Jesus’ message

has lost its saltiness through long familiarity.

Because the sermon on the mount,

even just this opening address of the Beatitudes –  
this is the message that got Jesus killed.

It’s the message that landed his disciples in prison and worse,

it’s the message that scared and disgusted empires

both ancient and modern badly enough

that they sought to twist it or erase it altogether,

it’s the message that continues to confuse

both Christians and non-believers today.

Scaling it down to bookmarks and t-shirts and wall plaques

seems a little like fear, too, really,

or at least an attempt to tame something wild and world-changing,

since this is, more than anything,

the manifesto of a gentle revolution.

You may be thinking that I am exaggerating for dramatic effect,

but imagine a world, your own day-to-day comings and goings,

if these beautiful attitudes were everyone's basis for action,  
if they were the guiding principles by which everyone  
– men, women, children; all occupations and vocations;  
rich and poor, slave and free –  
if this was how everyone lived their lives.  
It would indeed be a revolutionary new society, a new kingdom come.  
No matter how comfortable the house,  
we'll never feel fully at home in this world;  
we were made for the coming one.  
But while we're here, Jesus has given us a job to do:  
to be messengers,  
people who share these revolutionary teachings  
by our every action, word and thought.  
To be salt for bland imaginations,  
welcoming lit-up cities on dark hill-tops,  
lamps that illuminate  
every corner of the world.  
The kingdom is Christ's;  
all are welcome,  
and these blessings are for all.  
Thanks be to God.  
Amen.