Sermon on the Mount - Beatitudes February 16, 2025

Squamish United Church

Climb Every Mountain

Matthew 5: 1-12/Luke 6:17-26

Will you pray with me... Heavenly and gracious God I pray that my words come from you and fall upon open hearts, open minds, open lives, ready to accept your Gospel and respond with grace, love and action.

And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: And when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: For theirs is the kin-dom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: For they shall be comforted." (Matthew 5:1-4)

Here it is, the sermon on the mount. A famous sermon, perhaps ***the*** most famous of all. It is in fact the longest and fullest discourse by our Saviour Jesus Christ that we have recorded in the Gospels. It occurred to me that I might just read the sermon and then sit down for what possibly could I have to add to this work of art except that we are called as followers to continually look to the scriptures. To constantly look, listen and discern what God is calling us to do in our time and in our place.

This sermon on the mount is found in the Gospel of Luke in chapter 6 verses 17-49 but also in Matthew chapter 5. The general thought amongst scholars is that Luke's is the original version. Matthew's came later with the addition of a number of sayings that Jesus said at other times in order to give the full view of the Jesus's ethical teaching all in one reading. This sermon is a meditation on both versions, and it is meant to guide and regulate our practice. **To show us the way.**

Prior to delivering this sermon, Jesus had been preaching the Gospel in the synagogues, teaching in the fields, healing the sick and poor in spirit, so it is no wonder that he was being followed by the multitudes. Image that there are so many follows that Jesus has to go up a mountain to make room for all those who want to hear him. Imagine climbing a mountain every time you had to go work! Imagine, that his twelve disciples were seated all around him and that they eagerly awaited the moment when he would begin.

Prior to this sermon, Jesus has just begun to choose his disciples. He summons Peter and Andrew, James and John. They promptly obey, leave their nets, their boats and even their parents, and follow Jesus. They were ordinary people, doing ordinary things, leading an ordinary life when they were **called by Jesus to do the extraordinary.** Last week we discussed that Jesus wasn’t in search of those who are perfect but rather those who are committed. Jesus said come and follow me...**and follow** him they did.

Many began to follow. They were a crowd of people who have came out of love and a yearning to learn. Jesus preaches here to a multitude of people of every race, class and condition …the poor, the sick, the maimed, the rich-who are standing or sitting on the slopes and all who rest at the foot of the mountain. Some are listening intently I imagine, others are chatting with their companions or looking away in other directions, paying no attention at all.

The place is a mountain in Galilee and the multitudes have come from Judaea and Jerusalem to touch, to hear, to be healed. Pilgrims to the Holy Land often say that one of the high points of their trip is a visit to the Mount where tradition has it that Jesus preached this sermon to his disciples. A church building-appropriately named the Church of the Beatitudes has been erected there to commemorate that sermon. The Holy Land is the place where Christianity began. But strictly speaking, Christianity began in a very special way, in the life and teachings of the One who lived in that Holy Land.

On these remote hills above Lake Galilee, Jesus was going to teach his newly called disciples the fundamental lessons about life with God. What does Jesus teach his newly called followers? Does he teach them about prayer? Does he speak about love? Does he begin with a reading from Genesis? **No**. Jesus began with something much more basic. Jesus began by teaching his newly called disciples about…*happiness*, the simplicities of *happiness*, the blessing of *happiness*. Most people are interested in happiness. I bet everyone in this room wants to know about happiness. Whether you are rich or poor, young or old, male female or transgender, we all want to experience happiness. We all want it, look for it, and try to find it. Jesus begins his teachings by giving us a blue print for happiness.

The challenge before us today is to tackle this sermon and the Beatitudes that we find within it. Beatitude comes from the Latin word **be-at-i-tudo**, which means supreme blessedness or exalted happiness. This is where it all began...Jesus opened his mouth and began with the word "Blessed." Some of us might recall the opening line of the passage: "Blessed are the poor in Spirit..." or "Blessed are you who are poor" if Luke is speaking. The idea is that if you live the way Jesus lays it out, you will be truly happy, truly fulfilled. But, as you know, the best things in life always demand the best we can be and the greatest effort we can put forth. The life of beatitude to which Jesus invites us demands no less than **hard work**. Each of the blessings Christ here pronounces has a double intention: to show who they are but also what their characters are.

How shocked those disciples must have been to hear these words from Jesus. The sermon begins with a series of revolutionary statements, goals or ideals for one who would fulfill the requirements of entrance in the *Kin-dom* of God. Loosely defined the seven blessings are poverty of spirit, presence, humility, activism, mercy, purity, peacemaking and cross-bearing. Each beatitude is a challenge. Jesus takes the accepted standards of that day and ours and turns them upside down. At first glance they may seem overwhelming, daunting...**unattainable even**. You may feel defeated just reading the list let alone trying to live it. Very much like last week’s call to follow and **not be afraid**.

Several different ways of understanding this part of the Sermon on the Mount have been proposed. Some have taken Jesus’ declarations as ethical instructions, as if he is telling us to shape up and live humbly and mercifully if you want to receive God’s gifts. Others see Jesus trying to expose where true happiness resides, not in self-preservation and striving for more, but ironically in a humble embrace of simplicity, suffering, and disadvantage.

But perhaps, there is a third perspective. Jesus, here at the beginning of his public life, identifies the kinds of people he intends to “bless.” Who will be made content and gratified by participating in what God offers now and in the future? The kinds of people who suffer brokenness and grief. The people taken advantage of by friends and strangers. Jesus announces here right from the beginning that he intends to turn everything upside down; our taken-for-granted expectations about where happiness and achievement can be found. Blessed are those who we least expect.

Blessed are those who follow his lead. I was out walking my dog this week and I was astounded at how comfortable we both are walking side by side in unison. This is very different from when she was a puppy and was learning to walk the straight and narrow. One moment she was straining on the lead and pulled ahead. Then she would stop abruptly behind me, sniffing an interesting smell. A little further down the path, I would let her off the lead and she would run off and chase a squirrel or an unsuspecting neighbour, barking all the while. How much easier this would be, I thought, if she would just walk beside me.

Sometimes in our walk with God we are too much like my puppy — racing ahead, lagging behind, being distracted by this shiny thing and that, making unwise choices. How much better it would be to walk side by side with God! That way we can be encouraged by God’s presence and guided and enthused by God’s purpose for me, instead of by my own plans. Then I would be blessed. Learning to walk with God takes a lifetime. Learning to stay close, to trust and to let God guide us takes patience and wisdom and practice. Walking with God is risky business though and very contrary to what the world expects of us or even what we expect from ourselves. God knows it is a challenge to be merciful, to keep one's heart pure and to make peace with our enemies. Jesus calls us to rejoice and be glad. The call for each one of us is to take up the challenge to work for justice. We are challenged and may be persecuted as Jesus was for going against the status quo and the powers that be. Rest assured though that any suffering we experience because of our work for justice is somehow gathered up into Jesus' suffering on the cross. With this comes the opportunity to live into God's story of resurrection.

In the book “The Power of One”, James Merrell suggests that the Beatitudes may be more instructive when inverted or read "backwards". By so doing the Beatitudes are given an entirely new meaning:

"The way to Heaven is through poverty . . . the way to consolation is through genuine sorrow . . . the way to earthly possessions is through a gentle spirit that is neither stingy nor possessive . . . the way to satisfaction is through a hungering and thirsting for justice . . . the way to mercy is through mercy . . . the way to God is through the open, unobstructed, pure heart . . . the way to a full relationship with God is through the active practice of peace . . . the way to God's realm or *Kin-dom* is through the struggle for right that leads through conflict, pain, and even death itself."

If we take the Beatitudes from this perspective, they become something other than a recipe for reward. They are instead, more like a road map for life. They tell us not so much how we might arrive at our destination but rather present us with a commanding view of the landscape whereupon our lives are lived.

Here is Matthew 5:1-12 from the Message. As you listen to it again hear what Jesus is saying. John Wesley summarized this sermon in this way. Herestands "the Son of God, who came from heaven, here showing us the way to heaven; to the place which he hath prepared for us; the glory he had before the world began. He is teaching us the true way to life everlasting; the royal way which leads to the *kin-dom*; and the only true way, -- for there is none besides; all other paths lead to destruction."

**You’re Blessed**

5 1-2When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:

3“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and his rule.

4“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

5“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

6“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

7“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.

8“You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

9“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

10“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s *kin-dom*.

11-12“Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, *I* do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

Silence...

Let us pray. Holy and gracious God, God of promise and steadfast love, we give you thanks for the teaching of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. For the blessings we enjoy and the sufferings we presently endure, we give you thanks. For the promises by which we live and for the hope of glory we receive in faith, we give you thanks. Give us the sure confidence of your strength in this present time and the grace to await the coming of your *kin-dom* with anticipation and joy. Give us merciful hearts toward others as you are merciful with us, and give us the courage to be peacemakers and reconcilers in all that we do, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.