

BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING!



FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
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Matthew 5:1-12

Imagine you're a tourist in LA and it's Sunday morning. You know you really ought to go to church, but you're on vacation. So you decide to visit to the Getty Museum in the San Fernando hills.

Many of the galleries are filled with paintings by the Old Masters of scenes from the Bible. It's not exactly going to church, but you're trying to soothe your conscience. Amid the artistic wonders is a small 1598 painting by the Flemish painter Jan Brueghel the Elder entitled "*The Sermon on the Mount*." As you can see, towering trees forest the top of a hill. In the hazy distance are the towers of a Flemish town, representing Jerusalem. A little off-center stands the tiny figure of Jesus, with some disciples dressed in ancient robes. He is surrounded by hundreds of people in "modern" dress (modern for 1598, that is). A few of them seem to be intent on what he's saying. But most of them are going about their business. There's a man selling pretzels, a child with arms up begging, folks engaging in commerce, and with a slight sinister air, soldiers looking on. And there's a dog. Of course, my eyes would gravitate to the dog!



Brueghel has brought around three hundred individual faces to life with unique features. Soldiers gazing with guarded expressions — are they keeping folks at bay or are they looking for trouble? Can we blame the pretzel seller for taking advantage of the opportunity to sell his wares to a hungry crowd? There are folks off to the side climbing the hill — were they looking for Jesus or just about on business of their own? Will they stop to find out what's happening? Some listen entranced, some with faces seemingly

convicted by sin, others watching joyfully. You must wonder: Whose lives will be changed? And who will go their way, unimpressed, certain that the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount are meant for others, not practical, pragmatic people who live in the "real" world. Jesus doesn't really mean this, does he?

According to Matthew, Jesus, surrounded by crowds, walks up a nearby hill and his disciples and the crowd follow. By the end of this speech, however, it becomes obvious that other people have followed him, too. They have found him, and he is speaking to a crowd.

Today's Gospel passage focuses on the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, known as the Beatitudes. We know from the previous chapters in Matthew that Jesus has been baptized, tempted by the devil, hears John has been arrested, and calls disciples to follow him. He travels through Galilee, teaches in the synagogues, cures people of every sickness, casts out demons, and is followed by many people. Now, according to Matthew's account, he climbs a mountain and begins to preach with the Greek word *makarioi*. Some English Bibles translated it as "Happy" or "Fortunate." Ours translate it as "Blessed." Blessed are poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek and the hungry. What does he mean by blessed?

To be blessed is not simply to be happy. Blessed are those who work for the sake of righteous. Blessed are those, who amid turmoil can live with confidence because they know they are secure. To be blessed is to know one is included in the coming realm. And who is Jesus talking about when he calls people blessed?

We live in a time when the blessings given are to those who succeed, often at the expense of others. To be poor in spirit, sad, meek, and hungry gets you nowhere in a culture grounded in competition, the pursuit of comfort, or founded in fear.

This reality was true Jesus' time, as well. The Roman Empire benefited the ruling elites in multiple ways. People thought of them as blessed. But they imposed pervasive poverty, food insecurity, high stress, and widespread disease and contagion on the majority poor. So these first four beatitudes name oppressive situations in which God's kingdom is at work to reverse the damage imposed by oppressive policies, structures, and practices.

Being blessed is not about how we are to be, but are about the vulnerable, the people Jesus was ministering to. It is clear that Jesus' beatitudes turn the values of the world upside down. He reveals something about himself and his ministry with these beatitudes. His transformative work is underway in his actions and his followers. But is yet to be completed through us. The next five beatitudes in Matthew's gospel are about God's action in the world. God is merciful and pure in heart. God brings peace to our lives. Jesus knows he will be persecuted for the sake of righteousness and doing his Father's will. The point is that God acts in the world to favor not the privileged powerful but the oppressed poor, deprived of but struggling for justice. Jesus is concerned with how his followers will participate in society. God will work through them to transform the world in order to further God's justice. So those who blessed are those who are the vulnerable, but they are also those who God works through to bring about the kingdom whether vulnerable or people of means.

So, what can we do as followers of Jesus today? God calls us to work together in unity to bless others. The prophet Micah asks, *"With what shall I come before the Lord?"* And the answer is that the Lord requires, us to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. How might we do this at Trinity? This week I learned of an opportunity. Pastor Heckman and I attended a meeting at the Palisades High to decide how our community might together to help children whose families suffer from food insecurity. School breaks and holidays are especially difficult for these families. So, we came up with an idea. We thought we could ask our congregations to collectively put together 400-500 meal packs for the kids in the Palisades School District. They would be picked up at the Middle School on Maundy Thursday. More details to follow!

In addition, the bishop New Jersey, The Rev. Dr.

Christa Compton sent out a letter to her synod with ideas on how to protect the most vulnerable in their communities. She referenced "Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote in his 1939 volume 'Life Together' *"that one of the most important ways we live as the body of Christ is in the ministry of bearing."* Galatians 6:2 says, *"Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."* She goes on to say, *"Bonhoeffer explains: 'It is the fellowship of the Cross to experience the burden of the other... To bear the burden of the other person means involvement with the created reality of the other.'"* I take this to mean we all have the potential to bear the burdens of others provided we can be empathetic.

We are currently living in difficult times. Can we truly understand or identify with what it means to be an immigrant, to be a person of color, or an indigenous person in our country today? Bishop Compton continues, *"When we understand that lived reality, we cannot help but respond with love and compassion. Sometimes righteousness looks like holding a deep empathy that guides our daily actions."*

She gives some faithful steps we can take:

1. Pray for those being persecuted, and those doing the persecuting. Pray for those in authority to take actions guided by wisdom and compassion.
2. Study God's Word and what it has to say about welcoming the stranger and our vocations as citizens.

3. Reject language that dehumanizes people. Remember we are all created in the image of God.
4. Communicate with your elected representatives and urge them to make decisions that are consistent with the commitments of our faith.
5. Connect with local experts and networks of care. Now is the time to strengthen our relationships with each other, with ecumenical and interfaith partners, with organizations in our community who already know the most effective approaches to locally-based communication and advocacy.
6. Seek moments of beauty, joy, and connection. Find ways to nourish your souls.

It is hard to say who Jesus was reaching in Jan Brueghel's painting. Some were listening attentively; some were merely going about their business. It is hard to say who Jesus reached when he preached on that mountain outside of Jerusalem. But Matthew tells us that when Jesus came down from the mountain great crowds followed him.

Today, God calls us to work together in unity to bless others. God blesses us not for our own sake, but for the sake of others, as well. For you see the beatitudes are about God's beloved people. For whether you are in the category of vulnerable or more privileged, God blesses us to be a blessing to others.

In Jesus' name. Amen.