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Blessed Are You: A Sermon on Matthew 5:1-12  
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Imagine with me.

You are standing on a hillside, overlooking the Sea of Galilee, part of a crowd of people made up of all ages, classes, genders and races. They are pressing in all around you, all of you surging forward towards the man who sits at the top of the hill, the preacher you have heard all about. You have so many questions, so many needs, so many things to say that you think you may only be able to tell him, that you've never told anyone before.

The preacher starts talking, and instead of a well-reasoned, linear speech...it is a litany of blessing.

You lean closer, wondering if you heard him right, as many throughout history have wondered.

"Blessed are..."

"The poor in spirit? Those who mourn? The meek? Those who hunger and thirst? The merciful? Peacemakers? The persecuted?"

Mutterings spread throughout the crowd.

"Am I hearing this right?"

This is how I feel sometimes when I encounter the Beatitudes. Not in the Monty Python sense of hearing "Blessed are the cheesemakers," but more like sometimes I kind of want to sneak backward and duck out of the crowd... "woops, I am in the wrong place, gotta go" or "this is *not* what I thought he was going to say" or "well, those are nice thoughts, but I have troubles *right now*..." Sometimes I want to ask Jesus about the time frame of these blessings, "Excuse me, Preacher, but could you specify what you mean by 'blessed are' and 'they will'? Is that like a past tense thing, or a right now situation, or just in the next life?"

Say what you want for Jesus, but he doesn't always speak so plainly...

Or does he?

Mostly we read the Beatitudes in past tense. "Blessed are" as in they were blessed at a time in the past. The blessing came and went. But some scholars have sorted through the layers of translation from English back to Latin and Greek to Aramaic (the language which Jesus pretty surely spoke), and they say that a truer meaning is that blessedness is an active, ongoing process.

However, this does not mean that these statements are imperatives, as directions for our lives, setting the standard for the truest, bestest Christ-follower. And sure, we should try to be peacemakers, try to have humility, to be merciful, to seek righteousness like we are hungering and thirsting for it. But I don't think the Beatitudes are imperative in the sense of "go make yourself mournful so you get to experience the kingdom of God." But I rather think Jesus was looking around at the scores and scores of humanity gathered around him, and was just describing them. Just naming the characteristics, and promising the people that they have a place in God's heart. Like he was saying, "You are blessed, Tim. And Janet. And Pat. And Sarah. And Mike. You are blessed, right here, right now. That's what's going on." And so these words echo today. As our United Church of Christ siblings say, "God is still speaking," and this truth confronts us in these seemingly simple sayings from Jesus of Nazareth.

Alice Walker, the great womanist novelist and poet, in her poem "Blessed are the poor in spirit," describes how the first Beatitude challenges and informs her:

Did you ever understand this?

If my spirit was poor, how could I enter heaven?

Was I depressed?  
Understanding editing,  
I see how a comma, removed or inserted  
with careful plan,  
can change everything.  
I was reminded of this  
when a poor young man  
in Tunisia  
desperate to live  
and humiliated for trying  
set himself ablaze;  
I felt uncomfortably warm  
as if scalded by his shame.  
I do not have to sell vegetables from a cart as he did  
or live in narrow rooms too small for spacious thought;  
and, at this late date,  
I do not worry that someone will  
remove every single opportunity  
for me to thrive.  
Still, I am connected to, inseparable from,  
this young man.  
Blessed are the poor, in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Jesus. (Commas restored) .  
Jesus was as usual talking about solidarity: about how we join with others  
and, in spirit, feel the world, and suffering, the same as them.  
This is the kingdom of owning the other as self, the self as other;  
that transforms grief into  
peace and delight.  
I, and you, might enter the heaven  
of right here  
through this door.  
In this spirit, knowing we are blessed,  
we might remain poor.

The blessings which Jesus pronounced so long ago are not reserved to the past tense, or the future tense in “some heaven lightyears away” as the hymn says; these blessings are not imperatives, calling on us to do anything, to be meek or oppressed or mournful. These words are not telling us to be anything other than what we are, which is human. And with all humanity, there are moments where we feel downtrodden, depressed, when we struggle and feel like we’re dog-paddling and almost slipping under the waves. There are moments when we feel meek, when we grieve, when we feel hopeless. These blessings are an affirmation of humanity. Of my humanity, of your humanity, of our shared humanity. The Beatitudes declare that blessedness is a *state of being*, a declaration of the truth that you, you, you, and you and *all of us* were made in the image of a Creative and Loving God.

And as such, we must take up the wisdom of Alice Walker when she says, “Jesus was as usual talking about solidarity: about how we join with others and, in spirit, feel the world, and suffering, the same as them.” These blessings are not telling us WHO or WHAT to be, but HOW to be: people of compassion, who seek right relationship with God and with others.

I don't need to tell you how precious that is today, this week, in this world. This USAmerican culture in which we live, full of white supremacy and patriarchy and heteronormativity, often tempts us to take everything personally, to understand Scripture individually, to only think about our own wellbeing and our own salvation. This is what we are taught to do in an individualistic, capitalistic society. Watch out for number one, right? Vote for yourself and people like you. Protect your money and the money of the class you belong to. If you can't achieve the American dream, make sure no one different from you can either.

But as Christians, as people who intentionally congregate to be church together, we know that today's model of USAmerican individualism is not what Jesus was talking about during his ministry, or, at least, not what he was praising. So we hope, we pray, we know deep inside ourselves, there must be a way of being apart from the ratrace of our hectic lives that are ultimately controlled by corporations and politicians who act in their own self-interest and with electability in mind. We know that another way of being is possible, and we look to the gospels, and to these timeless statements of blessing, as signposts. But are we really ready to take them seriously?

Charles James Cook writes in one commentary, "Whenever we hear the Beatitudes, we are struck with their poetic beauty and, at the same time, overwhelmed by their perceived impracticality for the world in which we live. We admire the instruction, but we fear the implications of putting the words into actual practice."

The beatitudes concern not only humanity's relationship with God, but also with relationships among people on this earthly plane. God blesses us, yes, but then we must reflect God's good gift to each other. By declaring each specific aspect of Creation "good," God aligns Himself with even the most sensitively, deeply human parts of each of us. It is up to humans who are aware of God's goodness in our lives to draw our community's attention to God's graciousness.

Part of this is telling the difference between privileges and blessings. They are not the same thing. Despite what prosperity gospel preachers may say, and what the myth of the American dream may indoctrinate us to think, true blessings cannot be measured in capital, in worth, in gifts, in donations, in financial or political or social status. Privilege is a human construction, born of the ways that humanity has schemed to divide ourselves from each other. Blessedness is conferred by the continuous overflowing of God's abundant grace, the radical solidarity of God with humanity, and then the generosity of sharing grace with each other.

We live into God's abundant grace in how we treat each other, how we communicate our values, how we live into our ideals, how we love through the challenge and the despair and the rejection and the joy. How we treat each other with compassion. Henri Nouwen suggests compassion "grows with the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts through all walls which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end." We are, as Alice Walker writes, in spirit, united.

Jesus reminds us that when you bless someone, you see them as they are, and they see you as you are, and between you exists some measure of meaning that witnesses to the mutual humanity and specific shared moment. I am reminded of various blessings that I have given, in hospitals, on airplanes, on the street, during ordinations and weddings and funerals, in times and places when I expected it and felt prepared and in times and places when I fumbled for words and simply said what needed to be said. I am reminded of the blessings I have received, through text messages and laying on of hands, in

unexpected meetings in airports and during protests blocking streets, during the Time with Children right here in this sanctuary, and in hospital rooms and at bedsides where I thought I was the chaplain.

These blessings have kept me going by reminding me that Jesus blessed the crowd around him, in all their specificity, as they struggled to live and learn and love alongside each other while holding on to their humanity. Mercy Oduyoye, a Ghanaian theologian and grandmother of African women's theology, a tireless agitator for girls' education, women's healthcare, labor rights and self-determination writes, "The spirituality of resistance therefore enables one to hold on to one's humanity. Resisting anonymity is an expression of the belief that our individual humanity is meant to find expression in community."

In these trying times, my friends, when the fabric of democracy continues to unravel, when "America First" means shutting the rest of the world out, when avoiding sickness reveals our racism and xenophobia, when we hear the powerful paying homage to a sanitized and whitewashed version of history, we must all strive to hold on to our humanity. We must take up the responsibility of co-creating blessings alongside God, and we must bless each other. We must extend hospitality to each other, we must share exponential grace, we must respond to the Spirit's call to empathy and action. We must do this continually, because these are blessings that cannot be contained.

And so this morning, I say to you, friends, "blessed are you."

Blessed are the tired, those who can't seem to get up at the first alarm, those whose hearts feel as heavy as the Seattle-gray skies. God will enliven you.

Blessed are the overwhelmed, those who live with their hearts perpetually beating in their throats, those whose worries constantly tug at the hems of their clothes, demanding to be seen. God will calm your fears.

Blessed are those who seek chosen families, and those who have been sought to be chosen family. God will continue God's creative love in your lives.

Blessed are the people who have disabilities, who struggle with mental health challenges, who long to be known and embraced as their own beautiful whole selves. God will see and know you.

Blessed are the givers, who help others see the wonder of everyday life. God will give to you.

Blessed are the addicts, those who depend on drugs, alcohol, sex, relationships and food for comfort and fulfillment. God will show you your own worth.

Blessed are the children, those who are forced to grow up too fast and those who feel like they are never getting older. God will accompany you.

Blessed are the immigrants, those who redefine what and where and who is home. God loves you and lives in you and makes a home with you.

Blessed are those who feel like their own bodies are turning against them, eating themselves from the inside out, metastasizing. You are of God and God will never let you suffer alone.

Blessed are the oppressed, those who are forced to live with their backs against the wall, who live looking over their shoulders. God will hold you in the palm of God's hand.

Blessed are those who don't feel special, who struggle to love themselves in their ordinary-ness. God created you in God's image and God has made you loveable.

Blessed are those who have regrets about what they did or didn't say, did or didn't do. God will give you opportunities to live into your values, and will be with you every step of the way.

Blessed are the strong ones, the one no one checks on, the ones who hold the world together when everything seems to be falling apart. God holds you and reminds you that the world does not depend on you alone.

Blessed are the ones who are done, who can't go on anymore, who wonder why it's worth it any longer. God will shelter you and hold you fast.

This is a blessing that cannot be contained, by grammar or punctuation or policies or walls or privilege's many barriers.

Blessed are you.  
May it ever be so.