

We're in Year A of the church lectionary- three-year cycle of scripture readings, and today we're still in the season of Epiphany. Theologian and writer Diana Butler Bass describes it this way, "This is the 'Matthew Epiphany' year. It is a story of evil that tries to snuff out the light of Christmas- and the ways in which God widens the circle of light, the manifestation of peace and mercy, in the face of opposition. Since January 6, we've read the horror story of King Herod and his massacre of Jewish infants, been invited to "go home by another way" with the Wise Ones who visited toddler Jesus, and we have attended Jesus' baptism. Finally, Jesus addressed us. His first words? *Come and see*. His second? *Follow me*. In today's gospel, he shared with his followers God's vision of a just world" ([link](#)). One thing to remember always when reading scripture is the context in which it was written and who was writing it. Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospel writers, and he relies a lot on imagery and prophets in the Old Testament. For example, "in Matthew the mountain is a set apart place where the disciples receive instruction and catch glimpses of Jesus' identity" (Christopher T. Holmes, *Connections*), hence this Sermon on the Mount, whereas in Luke's Gospel, it's the Sermon on the Plain. "Galilee was outside the mainstream of Israelite life. It was neither a religious nor an intellectual center, with no political power. Galilee was, however, in contact with world trade and culture and because of that it became a very cosmopolitan region. People from different ethnic backgrounds inhabited the area, making it very diverse in terms of culture and religion. For that very reason Galileans were suspected of not being Jewish enough. Out of this context of marginality comes Jesus, who is depicted by Matthew as the

long-awaited Jewish Messiah” (Osvaldo Vena, workingpreacher.org).

According to Matthew, Jesus goes up a mountain, like Moses, and delivers his first words to his commissioned disciples. And these first words of Jesus’ inaugural Sermon on the Mount are words of blessing- known to many of us as the Beatitudes. Before turning to God’s word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ Matthew 5:1-12.**

The Beatitudes are not entrance requirements for the kingdom but eschatological blessings. There are no imperatives or commandments here. Some people believe that “faith—expressed through positive thoughts, positive declarations, and donations to the church—draws health, wealth, and happiness into believers' lives” ([link](#)). That’s called prosperity gospel. Jesus did not share that idea. No, this is not prosperity theology. This is not “blessing” as health, wealth, and happiness. “This is teaching so costly, so soul-rattling, so unpalatable, that most of us will do anything to domesticate or ignore it” (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). Consider the people whom Jesus calls blessed. The beatitudes show a God who shows blessing and favor in places where we might least expect God to be. The world refuses to bless the poor, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on. But God’s kingdom is not the way of the world. In fact, God’s kingdom is often found leveling the world order” ([link](#)). God is in the business of reversing just about everything the world values and worships, hence why the Beatitudes are also known as “The Great Reversal,” as they describe a genuinely counter-cultural way of living in this world. This is why we talk about the kingdom of God as the “upside down kingdom.” “Jesus revalues what has been disvalued; he honors what has

been shamed. Jesus changes the way the honor game is played and redefines the source of honor. Acknowledgment of honor comes from God, he says, not from neighbors” (Vena). Jesus blesses those who were despised by the society of the time. In first century Rome, the empire set the tone and ruled the day, or so it thought, but Jesus was telling his followers that Rome isn’t god and that God’s rule will reverse this. For God is God and God reigns in God’s kingdom, and they, as followers of Jesus, are equal citizens of God’s kingdom. “Jesus’ followers knew this deadening ‘power of the state’ in Rome. And now, twenty centuries after the Beatitudes, we know it, too” (Butler-Bass). Friends, things haven’t changed as much as we think they have. Scripture is just as relevant today as it was then, maybe even more so?! All the more reason to listen to and follow Jesus. And do we actually trust that in God’s kingdom, in a reimagined society, all will have enough- all will receive mercy?! God’s rule is different. In God’s kingdom all will be welcome and will have plenty.

Pastor and Writer, Frederick Buechner, reflects on Jesus’ upside-down kingdom. He writes, “The world says, ‘Mind your own business,’ and Jesus says, ‘There is no such thing as your own business.’ The world says, ‘Follow the wisest course and be a success,’ and Jesus says, ‘Follow me and be crucified.’ The world says, ‘Drive carefully- the life you save may be your own’ - and Jesus says, ‘Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’ The world says, ‘Law and order,’ and Jesus says, ‘Love.’ The world says, ‘Get’ and Jesus says, ‘Give.’ In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than

under a delusion” ([link](#)). In the beatitudes, Jesus “describes a world that is turned upside-down- an economy of blessing that sounds crazy to those who refuse to feel so deeply- a reordering of priority and privilege that the church has found awkward- even offensive- for centuries. For we live in a world where the loudest, strongest, wealthiest, and most privileged people prey on the ‘less fortunate.’ We live in a world where greed and selfishness pay big time, while meekness, mercy, and mournfulness earn little more than contempt. We live in a world where securing our own ease and comfort is our ‘right’- the rest of creation be damned” (Thomas). We live in a world where violence seems to be the answer and democracy seems to be constantly challenged. We live in a world where politics drive how we treat one another and where disagreement has become dehumanization. “But Jesus in his wisdom recognizes this disparity and addresses it here in the beatitudes: ‘Blessed are they...for they will be.’ The language is prophetic and hope-filled. It bridges the present and the future- the already and not yet- the kingdom that is and the kingdom that is coming. The blessing is here; God’s favor is now” (Thomas). How do we continue to have faith, to follow Jesus, to be Christ-like when even though every person carries a God given dignity simply by being created in the image of God, it feels harder to hold than it used to?

I love what writer Jan Richardson says about the word “blessed” here. She says, “To be blessed is not a static state. There is a dynamism within the word blessed: it implies an ability to be in the ongoing process of recognizing, receiving, and responding. To be blessed is to enter a kind of pregnancy: to take Christ in, to let him grow in us, to bear him forth, then

to receive him and bear him yet again in our acts of mercy, of compassion, of solidarity, of love.” In other words, to be blessed is to be Christ-like. Our discipleship must be alive with action reflective of Jesus’ teachings if we are truly followers of Christ. The Beatitudes are not just words to be admired but a way of life to be lived. They challenge us to transform our world through love, justice, and compassion. These nine beatitudes describe the nature and character of true disciples. Their demands are radical and thoroughly contrary to this world. We’d be here all day if we went through each beatitude. So today, in light of what has been happening in Minneapolis, and in light of it being the 66th anniversary today of 4 NC A&T students who sat at a Woolworth’s lunch counter and asked for something simple- “to be served. To be seen and were told no, but they stayed anyway, sparking a national movement.” I feel drawn with these injustices at the front of my mind and heart to highlight two beatitudes, although all of them are important and build on one another. I’m struck by the first one. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (v.3).* “The implication of Jesus blessing the poor, the marginalized, is not that they should be happy in their deprivation, for even though they may be poor materially they surely are rich spiritually. NO! “It is more an indictment on the society of the time for having forgotten its responsibility toward the neighbor. It is a warning to God’s people. It is a call to accountability, for if it blesses the ones who we curse, there is something fundamentally wrong with our theology” (Vena). What the beatitudes offer is both God’s blessing now and a promise of future redemption. God’s kingdom is breaking into our reality. There is no time for people to rest on their comforts. God’s

people are to be about being a people of blessing. Period. Within these beatitudes Jesus questions the way God is being understood by the religious and political leaders of Israel at the time. I also wonder if he isn't also questioning the religious and political leaders today?! Jesus, especially in the face of inherited systemic beliefs of a culture that tends to exclude, marginalize or try to *send home*, moves towards and *welcomes people home*. As followers of Jesus where we find people that have been pushed out, we bring them in. Where we see the silenced, we make room for their voice. Where we notice people orphaned by society, we become their family. Jesus teaches his disciples how to see with new eyes, how to see blessing where God sees it, even when the world refuses to see it. Jesus teaches his disciples how to love what the world finds unlovable. Jesus teaches us how to seek redemption in the places with people the world has considered beyond salvation. It is because of Jesus, not of our own strength, that we can live this way. What would it be like if we all sought this kind of blessedness? How would this affect how we engaged with one another and with God?

The second and final beatitude that I want to highlight today is *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God* (v. 9). I lift up this one because it seems to me that some of us are pushing back these days against the construction of a Christianity that is the opposite of the Beatitudes. Regardless of what our world says the powerful are not superior to everyone else. We, as the church, must continue to preach peace and compassion. Peacemaking is when you see suffering and refuse

not to look away. Peacemaking is what happens when you care about dignity more than power. Peacemaking is when you believe human lives matter more than narratives, talking points or institutional self protection. Peacemakers stand with the grieving; they listen to the wounded; they ask hard questions about systems that cause harm; they care about accountability because they care about life. Jesus does not bless force. Jesus does not bless domination. Jesus does not bless the dehumanization of anyone. Every life taken is a human tragedy. When I look at communities in Minnesota- when I see people having grief and calling for something better- holding those with authority accountable in a non-violent way, I don't see disorder. I see people caring deeply about human dignity and life- that looks a lot closer to peacemaking than silence ever has (Rev. Joseph Yoo). Even when we're scared, we choose LOVE. Even when we don't have all the answers, we choose PEACE.

Friends, do not lose hope for God in Christ is still at work among us. Peter Yarrow (of the band, Peter, Paul, and Mary), recently wrote a song of resistance, entitled, "Lift Us Up." I've been singing it, and I invite you to take in the words and then to go out and sing and live them. He sings, "Lift us up. Make our stand. Let love triumph in our land. Lift us up. Make us strong. Give us courage. To right the wrongs. America our hopes and dreams are truly all at stake. Let not the hate divide us. Let not our spirit break. Let not our courage falter. Let not our bravery fail. Let unity bring victory. Let love prevail" ([link](#)). As followers of Jesus Christ, we're called to keep nudging that moral arc. It bends because faithful, blessed people push. Blessed people of God, may we always follow Jesus the Christ! Amen.