Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Our Gospel passage today is the beginning of the most famous sermon of all time: The Sermon on the Mount, the first of Jesus' teaching. Pastor Jason and I joked a few months ago that sometimes we're tempted instead of preaching to just read the Gospel again and sit down, because there's nothing we can say that says it better than Jesus himself.

So with that I'll head out. No I'm kidding! I promise I really do have a sermon to preach, but my point remains: I can't really add anything to Jesus' words here. The Beatitudes are a powerful thesis statement that defines his ministry and reveals something radical about who God is in the world. There's a reason they are so famous and familiar. But I also feel that when passages are familiar to us, it almost becomes easier to misunderstand them, or to gloss over their original meaning. So although I can't add anything to Jesus' words, what I will try to do in this sermon is suggest two alternative interpretations that can help reveal just how life-giving these Beatitudes continue to be for us today.

I think the first mistake is that we often read the Beatitudes as if they are a spiritual to-do list, as a standard we must measure up to in order to receive God's blessing.

You see Matthew presents Jesus as a kind of new Moses. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Moses goes up to Mount Sinai, receives the 10 Commandments,

and comes down to teach the Israelites. So when we read that Jesus goes up the mountain and then sits down to teach, we expect commands.

And so when we hear “blessed are the merciful,” we think “I just need to be more merciful.” When we hear “blessed are the meek” we think “I’m not being meek enough.” When we hear “Blessed are those who are persecuted,” we think “I need to be persecuted more, because then God will bless me.”

When we read the Beatitudes this way, they become dangerous, because they can leave us feeling ashamed of all the ways we aren’t “enough” for God. They become dangerous because they seem to sanctify suffering, making people believe they must endure whatever pain they’re in to prove their faithfulness. Most of all they become dangerous because they make God’s love for us conditional, and if something is conditional then it can be taken away.

But if we slow down and really look at the text, we can see that Jesus is not adding dangerous conditions to God’s love for us. You see, in the original Greek, the verbs in the Beatitudes are not written in the imperative form, but in the indicative form. The imperative form commands, but the indicative form simply states what is true. Jesus is not telling people “Do this first and then you will be blessed,” Jesus is not commanding people to become more meek or merciful or to experience more persecution—no. Instead Jesus is simply stating what is already true. Instead Jesus is simply looking at them and declaring "You are blessed, exactly as you are.”

What if the Beatitudes are not about Jesus telling his followers who they should become, but rather are about what Jesus already sees? What if the Beatitudes are not about how we fall short, but instead are a radical act of Jesus claiming us as beloved and blessed, of Jesus seeing us amidst all the brokenness and saying “God is still at work within this reality”?

That would have been astonishing to hear! In our Gospel Jesus is speaking to people who knew the deep pain of religious exclusion and persecution, to those constantly mourning the injustice of life under Roman occupation, to those who had only known peace if it was implemented through brute force. He is speaking to people who were told by the world over and over again that their suffering meant God had abandoned them.

And Jesus looks at them and says “Blessed.” Jesus looks at them and says “God has not abandoned you.” This is why the Beatitudes are a thesis statement for all of Jesus’ ministry: they reveal that God appears where the world least expects it, that God is present with those the world has marginalized, that God names and claims all those deemed unworthy by the world as blessed and beloved. And the Beatitudes are a thesis statement for how God continues to be revealed in our world today: they reveal that Christ’s face appears behind bars, that God is present with families ripped apart by federal agents, that God blesses and claims each and every single person in ICE detention as beloved.

And this truth brings me to the second mistake we often make when reading this passage.

We often interpret the Beatitudes as if they are only individual, spiritual statements, when in fact they describe real, shared conditions that entire communities are left groaning under. Biblical scholars note that the poor in spirit are not simply individuals having a bad day, they are communities whose bodies are breaking beneath the burdens of poverty. The meek are not simply individuals who are shy or gentle; Jesus' definition of meek here actually comes from Psalm 37, and refers to those who have been oppressed by the powerful or the wealthy. When we individualize the Beatitudes in this way, and we fall into one of these categories, it's easy to think "Jesus is saying that I am blessed? But I don't feel very blessed."

My second suggestion is that even as Jesus names individuals as blessed within their broken realities, he's also making a much more structural claim here, about the way that God's values completely invert the world's. Jesus isn't saying that our broken realities are good: poverty and oppression and suffering are not God's desire for us, and there's plenty of evidence in the Bible to show that God mourns when we suffer. But Jesus is making a structural claim here to demonstrate that it is the very communities the world would deem unworthy that are most likely to live as Jesus calls us to. It is the very communities the world would say God has abandoned that reveal God's love and presence the most. It is the very communities the world deem broken that live out the mutuality God desires for us, because their reality forces them into a deeper reliance on God and one another.

Let me explain what I mean by giving some historical context to one example from the Beatitudes: Blessed are those who mourn. You see in Jesus' Jewish context, people would have engaged in the mourning practice of sitting shiva,

which is a week-long mourning period that occurs immediately after someone has been buried in the Jewish faith. And due to the extreme economic stratification of first-century Rome, many people were forced to live as day laborers, to literally wake up each morning and work to earn the food they needed to survive that day (this is part of the reason behind Jesus teaching his disciple to pray the prayer we still say today “Give us this day our daily bread.”) Within this context, sitting shiva for a week meant that an entire family suddenly lost access to the daily wages they needed to survive. So when a family was sitting shiva, it was only possible because they had a community showing up for them, a community that was bringing food and sharing resources to keep them fed and cared for and alive. Jesus said “blessed are those who mourn” not because loss of life is good, but because even within their mourning, those who sat shiva were able to glimpse the ethics of the kingdom of God breaking into this world, because within their pain they were already living the kind of interdependence and mutuality God longs for us to have, because within their brokenness they were already experiencing what it meant to belong to one another.

And so, when we start to consider these two suggestions: that the Beatitudes are not about judgment, but about unconditional blessing, that the Beatitudes are not simply individual statements, but about God declaring that the communities deemed unworthy are actually those where God is most revealed, we are freed to begin seeing what these Beatitudes have to say to us today.

Earlier this week, I attended a Rapid Response training organized by the First Ward. And we began the training simply, by turning to one another and answering the question: Why are you here?

One person spoke about living in a constant state of mourning, for neighbors and friends who have been detained and disappeared. Another spoke about wanting their community to have peace: not the absence of conflict, but the hard, active work of protecting one another. And someone else said he was there because he refused to stand by while harm was done to his neighbors.

As I listened, I couldn't help but hear the Beatitudes echoing in the room. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. And then later in the training, after naming the weight so many people were carrying, the facilitator said, "I am angry, and I am sad. But I am never hopeless, because of this community."

That, I think, is what the Beatitudes look like in real time: people naming what is broken about our reality, refusing despair, and trusting in God's continued presence as we continue to show up for one another. The call in the Beatitudes looks like Rapid response phone trees and mutual aid drives, like protesting in subzero temperatures and bringing food to those scared to leave their homes, like our members showing up for our siblings at San Timoteo and La Trinidad. The call in the Beatitudes is to live as a community that has no other choice than to be interdependent, that has no other choice than to belong to one another, because it is through this mutuality that God is most fully revealed.

A couple of weeks ago, I talked about how Jesus' ministry began with baptism, with God claiming Jesus as beloved before he did anything else. And I talked about how that order matters, for Jesus and for us.

Here, again, we see that order. Right before our Gospel today, Matthew tells us of Jesus calling his first disciples—Peter, Andrew, James, and John. And the very first thing he teaches them are these Beatitudes. Before they do anything else, the disciples receive this blessing.

The Beatitudes come at the beginning of the disciples' journey because blessing is what grounds everything that follows. As I said before: the Beatitudes are not about who the disciples should become, but about what Jesus already sees.

And the same is true for us. Today we remember that Christ sees us. Christ sees the brokenness of this reality. Christ sees the mourning we carry, our anger and fear and hunger for justice. And Christ names each and every one of us as beloved and blessed—even now.

But the Beatitudes also remind us of something even more radical: the kingdom of God is not waiting on us to create it. It's already been lived out, most clearly by those the world has pushed to the margins, most clearly in communities where survival depends on mutual care, most clearly in communities where hope is sustained not by optimism but by commitment to one another.

Our call is not to romanticize this reality, but to follow it. To let it confront our individualism and to let it completely overturn our lives. To choose interdependence, solidarity, and mutuality. To choose the cross, even when the world deems it foolishness.

The Beatitudes are not a demand that God places on us. They are a promise that Christ speaks over us, declaring us blessed and beloved. And they are an invitation—to align ourselves with the kingdom already unfolding in our midst.

Amen.