

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time - September 24, 2023

2 Samuel 1:17–27; (Ezekiel 19:1– 3; 10–14); Revelation 21:1–7; Matthew 5:1–9

“Blessed to be a blessing”

1. It used to be that in older movies you’d see the main titles and credits at the beginning of the film, even before the story began
 - a. They’d display the names of actors, technical staff, producers and director.
 - b. Most of the movies I see now start usually with some fancy animation for the companies in charge of production, maybe the director is listed, but you’re lucky if they even display the name of the movie
 - c. And as to the hundreds of people needed to act, prepare and create the film, well you just have to wait until the very end of the movie.
 - d. When you get to the end, it amazes me just how large a community of people is involved in a single movie
 - e. Due to the nature of filmmaking these days, it may well be that the group of people involved in shooting the movie (actors, camera, lighting, location specialists, etc.) may never even meet another group of people who are involved in editing and finishing up the film (staff with postproduction, Computer Generated Imagining, etc.)
 - f. But they do all get listed, each one with a title, in rolling credits at the end of the movie that at times take one or two entire songs to scroll by them all.
2. If the ministry of Jesus as told in the gospel of Matthew were a movie, we would have two sets of credits, and a that, both towards the beginning, not the end.
 - a. The very first set of credits comes in the first chapter: Jesus’ family tree
 - b. Then, after some action (birth story, baptism, temptation, healing and teaching) we have this very important scene which we call The Sermon on the Mount
 - i. And it begins with rolling the credits.
 - ii. Or at least that’s one way I’d suggest we could read that long list we have come to know as the beatitudes
 - iii. This is the list of the people who would be following Jesus, who would be part of the realm of the heavens.

- iv. This is the list of the people who form the community who bring to life the story of this traveling Jewish rabbi in living color on screen. They are:
 - 1. The poor in spirit,
 - 2. those who mourn,
 - 3. the meek,
 - 4. those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
 - 5. the merciful,
 - 6. the pure in heart,
 - 7. the peacemakers,
 - 8. and actually the credits keep rolling past our passage.
- c. The very presence of these credits is a signal that the ministry of Jesus upends expectations
 - i. This is not the list of donors you find at the end concert program
 - ii. These are not the names on plaques in front of buildings
- d. And the list feels odd, even if we grant that Jesus is going about his ministry in an unexpected way
 - i. These folks, generally, are going through a hard time. Yet Jesus calls them blessed.
 - ii. I wonder if they feel blessed, or special.
- e. Professor Raj Nadella from Columbia Seminary points out a clue that may help unlock new levels of meaning
 - i. In verse 4 (Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted) we don't get to feel the full meaning of the Greek words. In particular the word translated as "will be comforted" relates to the work of lawyers and could be translated into somewhat awkward English as "will be advocated for."
 - ii. Professor Nadella writes: "Merely comforting individuals and communities who are mourning due to hunger, violence and injustice might address the symptoms of their situation but does little to change the roots of their suffering."
 - iii. His insights based on the Greek words leads him to ask:
 - 1. WHO will do the advocating/comforting?
 - 2. WHO will be showing mercy, or filling the hungry?
 - iv. It's open-ended, he points out.
 - 1. And here you might be scratching your head.
 - 2. Isn't it God? I mean, it's obvious, right?

3. Yes, but Professor Nadella stresses that it could also mean that the community is joining God in those tasks
- v. He makes the point: “As followers of Jesus, we are called to advocate on behalf of the oppressed and do everything in our capacity to reverse their current situation... when we see oppressed people, the question need not, and should not, be: Where is God when people are mourning, hungry, treated brutally by the police and denied mercy in the courtrooms? Instead, the question should be: Where is God’s community and what is it doing to reverse the situation? The Beatitudes offer a promise of liberation to those at the margins of our society. They also invite and require anyone and everyone with privilege and power to participate in the process of making the promised liberation a reality. But the afflicted themselves have an agency as well...” (Raj Nadella)

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/all-saints-sunday/commentary-on-matthew-51-12>
- f. That last line connects us to another writer, Archbishop Elias Chacour.
 - i. I had the privilege of meeting him traveling in Israel Palestine,
 - ii. Our New Testament is written in Greek, but Jesus spoke Aramaic.
 - iii. We hear “Blessed” and we think it’s a passive word. But Chacour argues it is actually very active. He writes “It means ‘to set yourself on the right way for the right goal; to turn around, repent.’ When I understand Jesus’ words in Aramaic, I translate like this:
 1. Get up, go ahead, do something, move, you who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for you shall be satisfied.
 2. Get up, go ahead, do something, move, you peacemakers, for you shall be called children of God.
 - iv. To me this reflects Jesus’ words and teachings much more accurately. I can hear him saying: ‘Get your hands dirty to build a human society for human beings; otherwise, others will torture and murder the poor, the voiceless, and the powerless.’ Christianity is not passive but active, energetic, alive, going beyond despair...” (Elias Chacour with Mary E. Jensen, *We Belong to the Land: The Story of a Palestinian Israeli Who Lives for Peace and*

Reconciliation (HarperSanFrancisco: 1990), 143, 144. Quoted in Megan McKenna, *Blessings and Woes: The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke* (Orbis Books: 1999), 22–23.)

3. Our challenge as hearers of this passage and as doers of God’s word, is to see ourselves at either or both ends of these beatitudes.
 - a. Our challenge is to be those in the first part of each beatitude: those called blessed and challenged to act in our mourning and peacemaking efforts.
 - b. Our challenge is then also to be in the second part of each beatitude: to be those who are instruments of God to offer comfort, and food, and to advocate for those whom society ignores.
4. Suddenly we see ourselves in all these rolling credits. Suddenly we are blessed and are able to be a blessing.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/all-saints-sunday/commentary-on-matthew-51-12>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-51-12-4>

Reflection questions

1. Share a story when you saw yourself as one of the people in the lines of the beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-9 (being poor in spirit, in mourning, being merciful or involved in peacemaking, etc.). Did you feel “blessed”?
2. What are your main impressions of all those people Jesus alludes to in Matthew 5:1-9? Do you relate to any of them?
3. If Jesus could use you to be part of God’s work of blessing those people listed, what could that look like? Give a specific example.

Our reading this morning from Matthew 5 is commonly known as the beatitudes within what is also known as the sermon on the mount. For the scriptures today Doug and I are reading two translations of the same passage. Doug will be reading from Wilda Gafney's translation found in *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*, which is the version we've been reading for almost a year every Sunday. I'll be reading from another translation called *The First Nations Version: an Indigenous Translation of the New Testament*. This new translation's preface says this effort was "birthed out of a desire to provide an English Bible that connects in a culturally relevant way to the traditional heart languages of the over six million English-speaking First Nations people of North America." In collaboration with OneBook and Wycliffe Associates, a First Nations Version Translation Council was formed with Native representatives linked with over twenty-five tribes to prepare this final product.

In the traditions of Native North Americans, names of people have meaning, which by the way is very much like names in Hebrew. So, the literal meaning in Hebrew of the name of Jesus is in full display when he is referred to in this version as: Creator Sets Free (Jesus)

I have chosen to pair these versions because their language offers us new perspectives on passages we've heard before, and I trust they will shine a light of new meaning with the Spirit's guidance.

I invite you to stand for the reading of the Gospel. Matthew 5:1-9

Matthew 5:1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain and sat down; his disciples came to him. 2 Then he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the majesty of the heavens.

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children [daughters and sons] of God.

1-2 When Creator Sets Free (Jesus) saw this great crowd, he went back up into the mountainside and sat down to teach the people. His followers came to him there, so he took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and began to share his wisdom with them and teach them how to see Creator’s good road.

3 “Creator’s blessing rests on the poor, the ones with broken spirits. The good road from above is theirs to walk.

4 “Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who walk a trail of tears, for [Creator] will wipe the tears from their eyes and comfort them.

5 “Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who walk softly and in a humble manner. The earth, land, and sky will welcome them and always be their home.

6 “Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who hunger and thirst for wrongs to be made right again. They will eat and drink until they are full.

7 “Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who are merciful and kind to others. Their kindness will find its way back to them—full circle.

8 “Creator’s blessing rests on the pure of heart. They are the ones who will see the Great Spirit.

9 “Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who make peace. It will be said of them, ‘They are the children of the Great Spirit!’