11-1-20, The Holy Way

Sermon on Matthew 5:1—12

1. Introduction
2. There are two key ideas that Matthew wants the reader to understand about Jesus in his biography, which we call the book of Matthew.
3. Jesus fulfills all Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) prophecies concerning the coming Messiah. This idea is only hinted at in the passage we’re looking at today.
4. Jesus is a master teacher. Matthew takes the teachings of Jesus and gathers them together in five large teaching blocks. Matthew 5—7, which we commonly call the Sermon on the Mount, is the first of the five blocks.
5. The Beatitudes, as we commonly call this passage, use the word usually translated “blessed.” This word contains a much larger meaning that that. The word connotes happy, fulfilled, and to be envied, as at least a part of its meaning. I hope that will be helpful to you as we look at this beautiful text.
6. Prayer
7. The text
8. (v. 1 & 2) When Jesus saw the crowds [These are crowds who have followed Jesus from near and far to hear his teaching and to seek healing for themselves and their loved ones.], he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying,
9. (v. 3—6) **The things people experience**
10. (v. 3) Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [This may be an affirmation of the prophesy in Isiah 61:1, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me (remember that the word Messiah means “the anointed one”) to bring good news to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners.”]
11. (v. 4) Blessed are those who mourn [or are suffering], for they will be comforted. [Isaiah 61:2 reads, in part, “…to comfort all who mourn.”]
12. (v. 5) Blessed are the meek [or those who have been humbled], for they will inherit the earth.
13. (v. 6) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness [and justice], for they will be filled
14. (v. 7—9) **The things people do**
15. (v. 7) Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy
16. (v. 8) Blessed are the pure in heart [This probably refers less to avoiding impure thoughts, although that is important, and more to having a heart which is undivided in its desire to be in faithful relationship with God.] for they will see God.
17. (v. 9) Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. [This may be a corrective against the party of the Zealots, who believed that violence and force were the tools to end the occupation by the Romans.]
18. (v. 10) Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [Notice that this phrase, “…for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”, is the same as that in the first beatitude in verse 3. This makes what is called an *inclusio*, a literary feature that brings us back to the beginning of a coherent thought. Verse 11, which follows, changes its voice and offers a more thorough discussion of this blessing.]
19. (v. 11 & 12) Blessed are you when people revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
20. So, what shall we take away from today’s text?

How do we hear these pronouncements of blessing today? I think we tend to have a response that sounds something like this, “Aren’t these beatitudes beautiful? Aren’t they just so sweet? Jesus is the best!” in that response we have lost the power of this passage. My friends, when Jesus spoke these words, they were shocking! Jesus confronts two existing and related paradigms in this passage, and he confronts them directly.

We need to remember a couple of things about the culture of the time. One of those things is that there was a very easy test to see whether someone was righteous and faithful to God. All you had to do was to look at their bank balance. Actually, you would look at their home, the number of servants they had, the clothing they and their family wore, the size of their herds and flocks and crops. Everybody knew, just like they knew that up was up and down was down, that righteous people were rich and that rich people were righteous. And, obviously, unrighteous people were poor and poor people were unrighteous. It was very easy.

The second paradigm that was always in play was that of honor and shame. Every human interaction in the culture of the time had honor and shame implications. Everyone was either in a position of honor or shame. And if you were in a position of honor you wanted to stay there. And if you were in a position of shame you wanted to get to a position of honor.

And here comes this preacher from up in Galilee, and yes, he is healing people but still, he starts saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit…” Well there may be some who are poor in spirit who aren’t poor, but probably all the poor were poor in spirit. And Jesus says that they’re blessed. Jesus says that they are to be envied, that they are fortunate. How can that be? It only happens in relationship with Jesus! Jesus says that, in his Kingdom, in relationship with him, all the social paradigms are blown away. My friends, what Jesus says here is more than surprising. It’s absolutely radical!

And he doesn’t stop there. All the signs that the culture pointed to as society’s losers, those who mourn and have suffered, those who are meek and have been humbled, all those whose lives lead them to tears, their social location was obvious. Losers! And yet Jesus comes along and, in the very first of Matthew’s collections of his teachings, he says, “Oh no! These are not society’s losers! In my kingdom, in relationship with me, these are the ones to be envied. These are the ones closest to my heart.” Can you imagine?

See, my friends, when we follow Jesus, we aren’t taking the safe way out.   
We aren’t hedging our bets. To follow Jesus faithfully is a radical act. So, what does it look like to follow this radical preacher who also happens to be the Son of God. What kind of soldier of righteousness do we need to be? Well, the passage continues to tell us.

Those who are faithfully following Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord of heaven and earth, are merciful, pure and undivided in heart, peacemakers, persecuted, wronged as a result of following Jesus. Well, that isn’t very showy, is it? That’s not going to get our pictures under a headline that uses the word “heroic,” is it? And, again, we see the radical nature of what it means to follow Jesus as savior.

We will show mercy, even to those who don’t show mercy to us. We will work to keep our hearts pure and undivided in our devotion to God. We will seek to make peace in a world where conflict is glamorized, and anger is the order of the day. We will respond in mercy and love to those who would persecute us. We will recognize that those who have sought to follow God faithfully have often run into pain and loss.

I don’t know how the elections are going to come out, and neither do you. I don’t know whether there will be a clear winner on Tuesday night or Wednesday morning. I don’t know, and neither do you, what the days and weeks following Tuesday will bring. What I do know with absolute certainty is that this is a time for the church to be the church, with all the grace and love we have received from God.

My dear sisters and brothers, Jesus invites us today to rededicate ourselves to follow his radical path of love. Will you commit yourself anew to follow him? May it be so. Amen