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Beatitudes  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
February 8, 2026  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 5:1-12

This year - as I said in January, we will get most of our gospel readings from the Gospel of Matthew. And it's nice to focus on a single gospel for a whole year. For example, we can perhaps get used to hearing things using the lens called "The Gospel of Matthew" and that may help us hear the underlying messages more clearly. Or perhaps we will tire of the ways that Matthew repeats himself ... an affliction that also affects clergy. Or so I've heard.

There are two things about the Gospel of Matthew that I want to give Matthew credit for.

- The traditional words to the Lord's Prayer.
- The "sermon on the mount".

This essential material is found in other gospels. But the traditional words to the Lord's Prayer that we use here are the words we find in Matthew, not the somewhat different words we find in Luke. And the sermon on the mount is found in Matthew chapter 5-7. Similar messages are found in Luke, but they are scattered around. They are collectively often called the "Sermon on the plain". Matthew - to his credit - pulls the stories together. Which I appreciate.

Today, we read the very beginning of the sermon on the mount. That opening that we call, "The Beatitudes". That "blessed are those who ..." material. And how did you react when you heard those words. In many ways, the words are hard to hear. We don't like them. They are hard to hear. They are even harder to preach to. Because you have all heard countless sermons about these texts. Moreover, the beatitudes have been extensively turned into marketing pieces. We find them on bumper stickers and on the covers of diaries and journals. It sometimes feels like they have been spiritually laminated.

So when we read them today - I hope we were all able to - at least in a small way - hear them with new ears. Because in many ways, the beatitudes are ... disturbing.

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- The beatitudes say, “blessed are the poor in spirit.”. But we usually say, “blessed are people who are confident and in control”
  - The beatitudes say, “blessed are those who mourn”. But we usually say, “blessed are those who have worked through their grief.”
  - The beatitudes say, “blessed are the meek”. But we usually say, “blessed are the decisive, the bold, the dominant.”

If you think I’m being too negative, let’s do 2 quick thought-experiments.

Experiment 1:

Imagine that Jesus walked into this sanctuary right now and spoke the beatitudes to us. Would we hear them as “good news”? Or would we subtly try to correct Jesus at coffee time?

Experiment 2:

Imagine that the intentions behind the beatitudes are motions being made at our annual meeting. Would any of them pass? I can hear the objections already:

- “Blessed are the poor in spirit”. We would send that back to committee asap.
- “Blessed are those who mourn”. We would question our liability.
- “Blessed are the meek”. Nope. We want our leadership to be more clear and direct.

The beatitudes are - on the surface - crazy.

- When Jesus says, “blessed are the poor” we would respond .. ok, but not too poor.
- And that goes for all of them. Blessed are the hungry ... ok, but not too hungry.  
Blessed are the sad, ... ok, but not too sad.

Let’s face it. The beatitudes are disturbing. At least on the surface.

Was Jesus even listening to himself talk? “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth”. Really? Do the meek feel blessed? Do you know what the meek inherit? The meek inherit the scraps that fall from the tables of the rich. The meek inherit the leftovers, the refuse of our society. If the day ever comes when the meek inherit the earth it will only be after the rich have finished destroying planet earth and they have vacated the smoking remains of this planet and are on their way to Mars. And you say that these meek are blessed?

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And of course the classic. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Let’s go over a short list of people who had a hunger and a thirst for righteousness. And let’s see what they got.

- Jesus of Nazareth, who preached that we should try being nice to each other for a change - died by crucifixion.
- Mahatma Gandhi, who believed that all people are equal and should be free - died by assassination.
- Martin Luther King Jr, who believed that all people are equal and should be free - died by assassination.
- The list goes on: Sister Dorothy Stang, Malcolm X, Oscar Romero. You know that I could give you hundreds of names here.
- Let’s face it. Those who hunger for righteousness do not usually get filled. They usually get killed.

Excuse the rant. But let’s be honest. Those words from Matthew sound insane. And it seems like there are 2 ways that we can go here:

One way is to decide that the words are just crazy. They are noodle doodle. They are just word salad. But they make for great bumper stickers.

Or - perhaps we do not really understand what Jesus meant when he said the word, “blessed”. Perhaps Jesus meant something that is not immediately apparent by the word “blessed”.

In our society, being blessed means that you live a life of ease. You have friends. You have adequate money. You enjoy good health. You have status. You have control. Good things happen to you.

But in spiritual terms, when someone is blessed, it is not usually a free pass to a life of ease. Being blessed - in spiritual terms - means that we feel connected to the divine. For some of us that means we feel connected to a God “up there”. For some of us that means we feel connected to a God “out there”. For some of us that means we feel connected to God “in here”. And for some of us, that connection comes in community with others. In any case, being blessed - spiritually - is about feeling connected.

Being blessed is not a reward for good behaviour. Being blessed is simply the

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feeling that you are not alone. That we are all connected. That is what is meant by the peace of God that passes all understanding.

Being blessed is not about how we live our lives. It is about how we choose to be present. It's about being. Not doing. Not receiving. Just being.

And I want to be very blunt here., Jesus is not blessing poverty, hunger, or grief. Jesus blesses the people who find themselves in those conditions. Jesus does not pretend that those conditions themselves are good.

“Blessed are the peacemakers” deserves special treatment. Because I do not believe Jesus was blessing the people who stay quiet to avoid making a fuss. Jesus was not advocating ignoring conflict. Jesus is not suggesting we keep our woundings inside so that nobody gets offended. Jesus is not suggesting we should absorb harm ourselves so that other people do not need to change. In the Bible, peacemakers are a pain. They disrupt false peace as a critical step in moving towards real peace. Peacemakers might not fight. But they disturb the status quo big time.

Jesus does not ask the wounded to pretend that everything is fine. He does not ask the grieving to hurry up and get over it. Jesus does not ask the meek to disappear into the woodwork. The blessing Jesus offers is to know that you matter. You are important. You are connected. You are loved.

Being blessed means that our hearts share the peace of God. That is no guarantee of a life of ease. We can find that peace even in spite of the chaos of our lives. Sometimes the chaos of our lives even drives us to find that deep peace.

Being blessed means that we have found the divine in our midst. Being blessed means that we feel the divine in our hearts. And we know .... we know, that truly, we are not alone. And all of us - even the meek - can do that. Sorry. All of us - even the meek - can BE that.

In church-speak, Jesus is advocating what we today call a “ministry of presence”. That is a ministry that is largely defined by presence. Which means being present with other people in their space. It does not fix problems. It does not pretend that real problems do not exist. A ministry of presence is what it sounds like. Being present with another person in their pain. Not judging. Not fixing. Not ignoring. Simply being. Caring.

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Loving.

This type of ministry stands in contrast with ministries that are designed to fix things. For example, food banks directly address hunger by handing out food. Those ministries are important too of course.

A ministry of presence in one sense fixes nothing at all. But in another sense perhaps fixes the greatest need that each of us have. The need to know that we are not alone.

Jesus's entire ministry was largely a ministry of presence. Being with lepers, the sick, the suffering. Those people all felt abandoned by their own communities. Lepers were officially shunned by their own communities. But Jesus spent time with them. Reminding them that as children of God ... that they are worthwhile. That they matter.

Read through the entire gospel of Matthew and see where Jesus spent his time. He mainly travelled to smaller, poorer villages. Yes, the big confrontation at the end was in Jerusalem. But Jesus spent most of his time in smaller, poorer, places.

But wait a minute - you say - what about Jesus feeding 5000 people. What about that? Wasn't that Jesus trying to fix hunger? Well possibly. But I would invite you to re-read that story. And to realize that in the story there is no indication that those people needed food long-term. They just needed a snack to help get people home again. The story is presented as a type of miracle. But the food seems to come from the pockets of the people themselves. And moreover, if Jesus did see his mission as feeding people with bread - why did he only do it once? And why did he do it in the middle of nowhere. The story about Jesus feeding 5000 people is not really about food, or hunger, at all. But that's another sermon.

In any case, Jesus ministry was largely a ministry of presence. Spending time with individual people. And giving those people nothing - except this time, his caring, his presence, his love. And that was enough. That was actually a lot.

Today, things are not really much different. Many people suffer loneliness or isolation. And many people need to know that they are not alone. Including people who are not lonely at all. But feel shunned by their own community. And in our society, many people are shunned because of their background, or their ethnicity, or their financial

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status, or their mental health, or a million other reasons. Today a ministry of presence is a much needed gift. In fact, it might be one of our most pressing concerns.

[image: quote below]

The French philosopher Simone Weil put it this way. “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity”. Weil was speaking about a ministry of presence. And the importance of being present with people, in their pain. Without flinching. Without fixing. Simply being.

[image: quote below]

Fast-forward 100 years and we get the wisdom of the Swedish Heavy Metal band, “Amaranthe”. From their song, “Call out my name” they have the lyric, “I will never say this is fate. Whenever you need me just call out my name. And I’ll be there with your insanity”. In this song, “insanity” is not restricted to mental health. “Insanity” in this case refers to any of the many crazy aspects of life that we can get caught up in. And I love the line, “I will never say this is fate”. Nobody deserves to suffer alone. Nobody deserves to suffer at all. The ministry of presence is about presence. Not judgement. Presence. Not fixing. Presence.

[image: beatitudes]

This is a very long-winded way of saying that the Beatitudes actually do make sense. But only if we understand “blessing” to mean that we know we are not alone. Which happens to be the affirmation we find - twice - in our creed. Our creed that both opens, and closes, with the line - “We are not alone”. Thanks be to God.

If we - as a church - want to be faithful to the beatitudes. We do not have to be successful, or impressive, or strong. We just have to be a place where all people find that they belong. That includes the grieving, the tired, the unsure, the worn down. Be can be a place where nobody is invisible. A place where people can bring their whole selves into community. Together.

This is a place where we all belong. And I’m so glad that we are all here.

*Amen.*