

February 2, 2020

Micah 6: 1-4, 6-8

Matthew 5: 1-12

Holding Pattern

The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding

The words that called us to worship this morning are the first words of Jesus' public ministry, according to the gospel of Matthew – and though of course we can't really know exactly how Jesus' ministry began, it's easy to see why those powerful things he had to say about blessing came to be engraved in our memory of him in an especially deep way, almost like poetry. The name we've given to those words, "the Beatitudes" (*beata* being the Latin word for "blessed"), describes not only their content but how we feel about them.

But what does Jesus mean when he singles out particular groups of people who are having particular experiences of life and calls them "blessed"? The idea of "blessing" has become a murky one in our time. These days we toss it around lightly: I was late for my dentist appointment, so what a blessing to find a parking place right in front ... or, we were blessed with great weather on the day of the picnic... In cases like that, obviously, what we're trying to say is that we feel lucky that things went as we hoped they would, or needed them to, when they could easily have gone the other way. Things get especially tricky at times like Thanksgiving, when we gather around the table and give thanks to God for "blessings" such as home and family, health and food and shelter. When our life is full of good things that support and nurture us, it inspires gratitude – which really is one of the noblest human emotions. And people who live their lives in relationship to God, as we are trying to, are inclined to express that gratitude toward God, because God is at the epicenter of our sense of the meaning and value of life: God is the direction in which we lean when we feel joy or deep fulfillment. But as we express gratitude, if we're believing that God *gives* us those things for some reason, then how do we understand that other people do not have them to enjoy? If blessing can be given, can it also be *withheld*? I don't claim to know the mind of God in these things; but where the unequal distribution of the bounty of creation and the wellbeing that everybody craves are concerned, I do tend to hold imperfect (and, sometimes, willfully corrupt) human systems responsible – not God. In fact, I think that one of our core beliefs is that God wants bounty and wellbeing *for every one of us*, around *every* table, in *every* household. And that it's our task, as people who hold God at the center of our lives, to help express God's desire actively by, for instance, doing justice, loving

kindness, and walking humbly – and thereby to transform blessing from a set of nouns we collect to a verb God has enlisted us to help enact.

And in fact, isn't that exactly what Jesus was saying in the very first public word that he ever spoke? Blessed are the poor in spirit, he says; not just the ones whose tables or pockets or lives are full, but especially the ones who know something about emptiness or loss or struggle. There are a lot of different kinds of poverty in this world. There's poverty of resources, to be sure; but there's also poverty of relationship, poverty of prospects, poverty of imagination... It's so interesting that Jesus chose the phrase "poor in spirit"; he never explains what he means, but it seems to take in so many kinds of privation that we humans experience and impose on each other – almost as though he's saying, whatever you may be lacking, or longing for – if you're aware of a hole near the center of your life, then God holds you in a special way.

And what *is* that way? What *is* "blessing"; what does it mean to be "blessed"? Sometimes, the way we use it, it seems to mean "fortunate". Scholars say that an apt synonym for the Greek word *makarios* is "happy," or "content". But, really – *happy* are the poor in spirit?? *Content* or *fortunate* are those who mourn, those who are persecuted?? If we really believe that God cares for us all equally, not some more than others – then none of those ways of understanding what it means to be blessed quite work, do they? God may care for everyone, but not everyone is happy – even, as a matter of fact (as you may have noticed), even the ones whose lives are full of good things.

But I do want to propose a word that we might hear in the marrow of the meaning of Jesus' first public word: the word "beloved." As in: "*beloved* are the poor in spirit." Beloved are those who mourn, those who are persecuted, those who build peace or hunger for justice. *Beloved* are they – which is to say, *held in the fathomless love of God*.

What Jesus is saying, of course, flies in the face of our obsession with measuring. For the likes of us, there's a trap lurking in the idea of blessing that we won't see if we have on the self-reflective lenses we almost always wear, which magnify our tendency to compare who has it, who doesn't, and how much. I think what Jesus is saying is that, for those whose circumstances have stripped them of some of the comforts and supports and security that all of us would like to count on in this life, their leaning toward God may awaken them to the truth that they are *beloved of God* in a way that is particular to their struggles – not more than other people, but in a way that Jesus thinks God will make especially vivid for them, the way an embrace from a friend lands in a deeper place when your heart is broken than when all is well, even if the love between you is constant. *Beloved* of God are the poor in spirit, Jesus says – and he is asking them to believe, to feel and know, that, in their need, they hold a special place in God's own heart – that God beckons them to come close and live in the shelter of God's company.

So part of our spiritual work in a society that is obsessed with wealth and comfort and status is to wrap our minds (and our consciences, particularly) around the memory that Jesus said, first of all, that the poor in spirit are beloved of God – and to ask ourselves what the implications might be for us of God's holding the poor in spirit in that relationship.

It's not hard to understand why the rest of what he said on that hillside stuck in the religious imagination, not only of those who heard it, but of everyone they ever told about it, all the way to us. How it must have startled them to hear him pronounce blessing, not only upon the poor in spirit (which is already just about everybody, sometimes), but upon those whose particular circumstances had left them bereft or alone or distressed. These are not the ones who *look* blessed. But look at them again, he says, as his eyes scanned the margins of the social fabric of his world; look at them again and see that they *are* blessed, all part of God's pattern of holding, God's holding pattern: God's habit of loving, never exclusively, but always particularly.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, he said; *beloved of God* are those whose lives have left them vulnerable – because they are invited find shelter in God's own heart. *Make sure they know that*, he seems to whisper. *Make sure you know that*.

Blessed are those who mourn; *held in the love of God* are those who find the courage and tenacity to pick up their love and carry it back into life, back into time, telling the honest truth of how sometimes love is an ache; they will discover that it is possible to hold loss and life together in the same heart. *Help them believe that*, he seems to whisper. *Believe it yourself*. Blessed are the meek, he said; *held in the love of God* are those who live gently among us – “no more than my space, no less than my place”; those gentle, generous ones belong to the earth, and the earth belongs to them. *Show them how true that is. Let them show you*.

Blessed are the merciful; *held in the love of God* are those who are generous when they have every reason to be bitter – beloved of God are those who open the door when no one would blame them for slamming it shut. Held in the love of God are those who see the whole beauty of the human family in every splintered part of it. The love they give will come back to them, a thousand-fold. *You know that*, he seems to whisper, *because you've loved them yourself*.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; *held in the love of God* are the ones whose ability to imagine justice, to envision peace, to conceive of respectful love, is so real and embodied that it gnaws in the pit of their stomachs and throbs in their heads; beloved of God are those who feel the choking dryness of inequality in their throats, the parchedness of prejudice on their tongues. They shall keep the joyful feast at the table of peace where bread and justice are served. *Come from east and west and from north and south*, he says (full voice now) – *come, and join them there*.

And blessed are those who are persecuted; *held in the love of God* are those who find it costly to hold God as God holds them – the ones who endure the jealousy of those who make the mistake of thinking that God’s love is scarce, and the anger of those who know that the power they hoard is no match for the integrity of love and justice. Their place is with God; and God’s place is with them.

Rejoice and be glad, he says, just before he finishes his very first words. *Count your blessings, if you must; but look around you, too, and count the blessed. To take your place in the holding pattern of God’s fathomless love – well, that’s what heaven is.*

And who could ever forget those words?

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