

“Blessed”
Mt. 5:1-12
Sunday, November 5, 2017
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Robert Schuler called them “The Be-Happy Attitudes.” In fact, some translations of the New Testament begin each blessing with the word “happy” – “Happy are the poor in spirit...Happy are those who mourn...Happy are the meek...”

These translations come from the Greek word for “happy,” *makarioi*. It’s a legitimate translation, and Robert Schuler’s approach is a legitimate interpretation of the Beatitudes. One goal Jesus may have had in preaching his first sermon – the Sermon on the Mount -- was to show severely oppressed people a way to be happy.

I. Psalm 1 and the Sermon on the Mount.

But scholar Earl F. Palmer’s approach makes sense to me. It feels right in a context of mourning and oppression.

Jesus interprets the Law -- the Torah -- in the tradition of a Jewish rabbi. Palmer presents a theory that Jesus organizes his sermon around the structure of the 1st Psalm. Hang in there with me; I know -- “sermon structure” -- who cares? But this is Jesus’ sermon structure...

Psalm 1 begins, “Blessed is the one who walks not in the way of the wicked but in the way of the Lord” – this is Palmer’s translation.

Psalm 1 ends with a parable: “The righteous are like a tree planted that bears fruit, but the wicked are not so, they are like chaff that the wind drives away.” Jesus begins his sermon, like Psalm 1, with blessings. He then closes his sermon, at the end of Mt.7, with a parable similar in

theme to that of Psalm 1: “The wise man or woman hears and does these words of mine and builds a house on rock; such a house withstands storms. The one who hears and does not do these words is foolish, and that house is built on the sand; it falls away in the storm” (Mt. 7:24-27; trans., Earl F. Palmer).

Are you still with me? Psalm 1 and the Sermon on the Mount begin with blessings.

Psalm 1 and the Sermon on the Mount end with similar stories. Jesus, teaching like a rabbi in the synagogues, is using Psalm 1 to interpret Hebrew scripture – the Old Testament -- for the people.

So let’s see how the Old Testament uses the word “blessed.”

In Psalm 1 the Hebrew word for “blessed” is *‘ashar.*’ In some Psalms, like Psalm 103, the Hebrew word for “blessed” is *‘barak*’, which means “to bow or to stoop.” So in Psalm 103, “Bless the Lord, O my soul,” means, “Bow to the Lord.” Or in Numbers 6:22, “The Lord bless you,” translates as, “The Lord stoop down to you.”

In Psalm 1, *‘ashar*’ or “blessed” means “to find the right road.”

So, if Palmer is correct...if Jesus is basing his first sermon on Psalm 1...then he is using the word “blessed” in the Psalm 1 sense. He is using the Hebrew *‘ashar,*’ which means “to find the right road.”

Jesus’ first sermon is intended to give his followers signposts along the journey of faith. Each blessing demands a change in attitude – yes! – but also a decision to take new action in a Christlike direction.

“One Sunday as they drove home from church, a little girl turned to her mother and said, ‘Mommy, there's something about the preacher's message this morning that I don't understand.’ The mother said, ‘Oh? What is it?’ The little girl replied, ‘Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. He said God is so big that He could hold the whole world in His hand. Is that true?’

The mother replied, ‘Yes, that's true, honey.’ ‘But Mommy, he also said that God comes to live inside of us when we believe in Jesus as our Savior. Is that true, too?’ Again, the mother assured the little girl that what the pastor had said was true. With a puzzled look on her face the little girl then asked, ‘If God is bigger than us and He lives in us, wouldn't He show through?’ That is what the beatitudes are about -- God showing through.” (Jerry Shirley).

You are on the right road when “God shows through.” Jesus gives us a roadmap.

II. You are on the right road when...

Jesus says...

You are on the right road when you recognize your poverty of spirit.

Do we know that we need God? Gen Van Houten knew she needed God. Aileen Webb knew she needed God. Trudy Poch knew she needed God. All the saints who have gone before us knew of their need for God. When we open our eyes and see that we are spiritually impoverished, we are on the right road. We are blessed.

Jesus says...

You are on the right road when you mourn.

We know how to mourn our own losses. I grieve over the loss of Gen and Aileen and Trudy. I miss my mother. I didn't know Clark Soong or Fung Dun Kwong, but I know they have meant a great deal to us as a whole-church family. I grieve over the loss of Clark and Fung Dun.

The right road calls us to go deeper. Jesus preaches that we are to look around us. We are to see our brothers and sisters. And we are to love them so much that we come to an awareness of the grief we would feel if they were to die. We would mourn if they died.

And Jesus, in his sermon, urges us to look further, beyond the circle of our church family,

to consider that all people are our brothers and our sisters. Our awareness of grief and mourning – if we are on the right road – includes our neighborhood and our community, expanding ever outward. If we are on the right road, we have a heart like Jesus' heart. We mourn for the world and all its people. We long for the day when God's kingdom is fully established on earth.

Jesus says...

You are on the right road when you see the meek, the poor, the humble -- and count yourself among them, walking in solidarity with them.

Jesus says...

You are on the right road when you hunger and thirst for righteousness – for God's truth. This may put you at odds with friends and family. This may create divisions between you and this generation. The world so often ignores or trivializes the things of God.

Jesus says...

You are on the right road when you show mercy to others as God has shown mercy to you. God's mercy is revealed in the suffering, death and resurrection of His Son for your sake.

Jesus says...

You are on the right road when you are pure in heart. To be pure in heart is to aim for holiness in your life. To be pure in heart is also to rely on Christ, because you know you can't live a holy life without him; only God in Christ Jesus is holy.

Jesus says...

You are on the right road when you are engaged in peacemaking. Peacemaking is hard work, and often dangerous. You are on the right road when you are a peacemaker, promoting the peace of Christ in the world.

Jesus says...

You are on the right road when you are persecuted for the sake of God's truth and righteousness. This is the 8th beatitude, often counted as the last blessing on the list. But a 9th takes this expectation of persecution even further:

Jesus says...

“You are on the right road when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kind of evil against you falsely on my account.” So – a signpost along the journey, if you are on the right road, is that folks will treat you pretty bad. You will suffer some pretty awful things for God.

Suffering is an expected part of a Christian's journey.

III. For you will receive this promise...

But let's not forget the promises that go along with the sufferings of walking the right road that Jesus sets before us.

Jesus promises that, if you follow the right road, you will receive the kingdom of heaven, and great rewards there; you will be comforted; you will inherit the earth; you will be filled with food and drink; and you will receive mercy.

Like Moses, you will see God – we talk about this at funerals, how our loved ones see God face to face. We believe that today for Gen, Aileen, Trudy, Clark, and Fung Dun. They see the face of God, like Moses did. This is an amazing truth.

You will be called children of God. What greater joy, than to be called a child of God?

I am beginning to understand verse 12: “Rejoice and be glad!”

Yes, there is suffering and grief and mourning and hard times. The prophets and the saints who came before us have suffered and mourned. They have faced hard times.

But, oh, the promises of God. They make it all worthwhile.

Closing.

And here's the best part – Jesus walks with us on the road. The Beatitudes are signposts along a journey of faith that Jesus walks with us. Jesus shows us “the right road.” Jesus shows us the way, keeps us on track, and goes and finds us when we wander off the trail.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor in Germany who was hanged by the Nazis during WWII, has this to say:

“Having reached the end of the Beatitudes, we naturally ask if there is any place on this earth for the community which they describe. Clearly, there is one place, and only one, and that is where the Poorest, Meekest, and most sorely Tried of all men is to be found -- on the cross at Golgotha. The community which is the subject of the Beatitudes is the community of the crucified. With Him it has lost all, and with him it has found all.”

Jesus walked with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Jesus walked with Aileen Webb and Gen Van Houten... with Trudy Poch and Clark Soong and Fung Dun Kwong. Jesus walked with all the saints before us.

Jesus walks with you and me.

May we remain faithful to “the community of the crucified.”

Amen.