

Sermon
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 29th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [MICAHAH 6:1-8; PSALM 15; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31; MATTHEW 5:1-12](#)

In some translations of these well-known verses we've just heard from Matthew's Gospel – often referred to as the Beatitudes – we have the word “happy” instead of “blessed”. The Greek word *makarios* can mean both. It changes these words, though, doesn't it:

“Happy are people who are downcast, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad. Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.” (Common English Bible)

To our modern ears, happy might well seem less holy. How can we be happy and downcast? Happy and grieving? Happy has become a transient state that comes and goes as circumstances change. Not so in the ancient world though. Happiness was a possession of the soul, something one acquired and that, once acquired, could not easily be taken away. For first century Christians, it connected more closely to their sense of unity with God in an eternal sense.

These verses – the Beatitudes – come from what is referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. Not one sermon, but a summary of Jesus's teachings. These verses have often been viewed and interpreted as a laundry list of tasks for Christian disciples. If we are meek, if we are merciful, if we are pure in heart, then we will be happy...then we will experience blessing...

In our humanity we might find ourselves longing for “how-to” manuals and checklists. We might look to the words we heard from the prophet Micah in the same way – as a checklist – when we hear “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”, striving to “tick the boxes” of justice, kindness and humility.

Perhaps you've heard of what Harvard psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar calls the “arrival fallacy”: the belief that once we reach a certain destination, once we

achieve a particular success we'll be happy. If we apply this to our Christian faith, we might say that we'll be happy when we no longer have doubts. We'll be blessed – or happy – when we're meek enough, when we've suffered enough. We'll be happy – or blessed – when we've done enough justice, loved kindness enough, been humble enough.

Jesus spoke these words of blessing to a crowd that was without question “not enough” in that world. His words to them were descriptive: blessed – or happy – *are*. He was describing a present reality, not directing them to a destination that would see them be stronger, bolder, or different before they arrived.

The blessing – the happiness – came first. It came first then, and it comes first, now. We don't arrive at it, we find it, we feel it, right where we are. It is right where we are no matter what it is that we are feeling. Doubt, grief, fear: God is with us in all of it, blessing us.

John Butler Yeats, father of the famous poet William Butler Yeats, wrote this to his son:

“Happiness is neither virtue nor pleasure nor this thing nor that, but simply growth. *We are happy when we are growing.*”

Studies indicate that the happiest people are not those who have achieved all their goals, but rather those are making progress toward their goals. It is in the striving that we encounter the kind of happiness that is best described as joy.

Everything in The Beatitudes is about growth. These things named – poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, peacemaking, pureness of heart, persecution – these are all things that stretch us, that ask us to grow. Looking to Micah: doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly. These things also ask us to stretch and grow!

Barbara Brown Taylor paraphrases the Beatitudes, rendering the sixth one as “Blessed are the wholehearted, for they shall see God”. To be authentically whole-hearted requires hard work of growth in self-knowledge, and a willingness

to live from our hearts rather than our egos. This work is about stretching and growing, and it is lifelong.

In stretching and growing we are vulnerable. The crowd who heard these words of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount – these words about happiness and blessing – were vulnerable. Jesus blessed their vulnerability and he blesses our vulnerability. He says to us that we are blessed – we are happy – when we are open to unity with God and one another and our world. This is very different way of seeing and being than striving to adhere to a laundry list of tasks. This is about being loved, and loving God, one another and our world the way that Jesus did.

The Beatitudes and Micah's call to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly are about growth, and they are about compassion. Compassion isn't about having pity or sympathy for "poor people", it's about something more, something deeper.

Henri Nouwen said:

"...compassion grows with the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts through all walls which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end." (*With Open Hands*)

This recognition brings us to common ground, and it is on this common ground that we can do the work of peacemaking and reconciliation that are God's dream for us and for our world. It's on common ground that we walk humbly with God, that we walk a Gospel walk. I've said to you before that God wants partners not puppets. This invitation to partner with God is woven through all of creation. The invitation doesn't have prerequisites. We don't have to accumulate a certain number of hours of justice, kindness or humility to start partnering. The requirement is that we join in, with love and compassion and empathy for ourselves and for others.

The Beatitudes, and the words of the prophet Micah point us to the Way of Jesus. They point us to fullest living, with God and one another. They show us how to be, but it's not about following a how-to manual or a checklist. The Way of Jesus is about relationship. It's about vulnerability. It's about growth, and it is

about letting the blessing – the happiness – that flow from God to us through Jesus and the working of the Spirit saturate our hearts and minds, and guide us to walk humbly with God – to walk a Gospel walk – every day. May it be so, in Jesus name. Amen.