

January 29, 2023
Matthew 5:1-12

Epiphany 4
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Language of Grace”

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.”

Watching movies on streaming services such as Netflix has made it possible for home viewers to schedule their viewing at times that are convenient to them. Before this was possible, watching a movie meant either getting to the theatre on time or turning on the television when the movie began. If you were late in either situation, you would miss the beginning of the movie, which at times meant that the rest of the film did not make a lot of sense. Coming into a movie or a television program after the beginning often robs a viewer of the necessary context needed to understand the plot of the film.

Understanding the context of a story is important in our understanding of biblical texts; without knowing what happened before a particular reading, certain Bible stories can be difficult to understand and can even be misinterpreted. The first rule of Bible study is do not take anything out of context – a rule we violate every Sunday in our lectionary reading. While preachers attempt to place the lessons assigned to a particular Sunday in their proper setting, not knowing what happened before the lesson read at worship can make what is being proclaimed in the worship assembly difficult to understand and to grasp the message being proclaimed to us in the present day.

This Sunday’s Gospel reading is one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. The Beatitudes are well-known for their teaching on what it means for a follower of Jesus to be “blessed,” a definition that is often at odds with the world’s understanding of blessedness. The Beatitudes are the first passage in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ monumental teaching that takes up three chapters in Matthew’s Gospel. The Sermon on the Mount also includes Jesus’ instruction to his followers to be the “light of the world” and “salt of the earth”; his teachings on prayer that include the Lord’s Prayer; the so-called “Golden Rule” that *“in everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets”* (7:12), and his invitation to his followers to *“ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”* (7:7). The Sermon on the Mount *“expounds the fundamental attitudes Jesus’ disciples are to have in relationship to God as their*

Father, to Jesus as their Lord, to one another as brothers and sisters, and to others, even their enemies.” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

But like a movie whose plot only makes sense if we watch it from the beginning, to fully understand the context of Jesus’ teaching we need to look at the previous verses before Matthew’s introduction to the Sermon, in which the Evangelist reports that “*when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.*” (5:1). The “crowds” Matthew refers to are the people who in the previous verses had been healed by Jesus:

- “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.” – 4:23-25.

Before Jesus makes any demands on those who would be his followers, he shows compassion by healing the sick among the crowds. This act is pure grace, for the crowds have done nothing to earn these healings. Jesus’ first act is not the imposition of difficult imperatives but the selfless service of others: “*The implicit lesson is that grace comes before task, succor before demand ... Today’s command presupposes yesterday’s gift.*” (Dale C. Allison). It is important to understand this context when we read the Beatitudes, for in one respect they also speak the language of grace. Jesus’ first teaching in the Sermon on the Mount does not so much list the “entrance requirements” for the Kingdom of Heaven so much as it offers comfort for the saints, to the poor in spirit, and to those hungering and thirsting for righteousness. The first half of each Beatitude depicts the community’s present; the second half foretells the community’s future. Matthew’s Beatitudes are not formally imperatives but offer hope to those in difficult situations.

- “The beatitudes proclaim that someday God will give human beings what they cannot obtain for themselves on their own. Again the lesson is grace ... the grace of the Sermon on the Mount does not mean one can take it easy. Grace is rather the strength to do the difficult.” – Allison.

The gathering of this large and diverse crowd described in 4:25 to hear the Sermon on the Mount places Jesus’ instruction in the context of his own previous acts of

announcing the Kingdom of Heaven and acting in mercy to illustrate his power and its nature. It is a teaching addressed to people who have been *“healed without any requirements or making any confession of faith. It is entirely the initiative and grace of the messianic representative of God’s Kingdom.”* (Eugene Boring). The Sermon on the Mount is not geographical but theological; the mountain of revelation corresponds to both Mount Sinai and the mountain where the risen Lord commissions his disciples (*“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.”* – 28:16). Matthew reports that Jesus *“sat down, [and] his disciples came to him.”* Jesus the teacher sits while teaching in the manner of a revered Jewish rabbi. Matthew pictures the sermon as being delivered primarily to “disciples,” a large crowd of followers that includes, but is not limited to, the Twelve. Those who hear the sermon may include others who *“aren’t the direct audience of the sermon, but they are presumably the recipients of the divine favour Jesus says God has in store.”* (Jillian Engelhardt).

Jesus begins his sermon with a series of nine “beatitudes,” statements declaring certain people to be in a privileged, fortunate circumstance. In a religious context, *Makarios* means “blessed.” In the Old Testament, beatitudes declare the present/future blessedness of those who are presently in dire circumstances, but who will be vindicated at the eschatological coming of God’s Kingdom:

- “Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.” – Isaiah 30:18.
- “Happy will you be who sow beside every stream, who let the ox and the donkey range freely.” – Isaiah 32:20.
- “Happy are those who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred and thirty-five days. But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days.” – Daniel 12:12-13.

In the New Testament outside of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), most beatitudes are found in Revelation:

- “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and keep what is written in it; for the time is near.” – 1:3.
- “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them.’” – 14:13.

Matthew's beatitudes are not practical advice for successful living, but prophetic declarations made on the conviction of the coming and already present Kingdom of God. They declare an objective reality as the result of a divine act, not subjective feelings. There is an ethical dimension to the Beatitudes: the community that hears itself pronounced "blessed" does not remain passive, but acts in accord with the coming kingdom. *"The Beatitudes pronounce blessing on authentic disciples of the Christian community."* (Boring).

Jesus begins his Beatitudes with the announcement that *"blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* (5:3). "Poor" here refers not only to literal poverty but also connotes a lack of arrogance and sense of one's own need, those who recognize their dependence on God. As Christ is meek and poor in spirit, as he who as in the *"form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited"* (Philippians 2:6), so are those to whom the kingdom belongs.

Jesus next proclaims that *"blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."* (5:4). One of the characteristics of the true people of God is that they lament the present condition of God's people and God's program in the world, knowing that God is the one who will turn *"my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent."* (Psalm 30:11-12).

Jesus reformulates the words of Psalm 37 as a beatitude that *"blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth"* (*"For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land ... the meek shall inherit the land, and delight in abundant prosperity."* – Psalm 37:9, 11). Meekness (*prais*) characterizes those who are aware of their identity as the oppressed people of God in the world and who have renounced the ways of this-worldly power. "Inherit the earth" is a metaphor for participation in the renewed creation (*"Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'"* – 19:28).

Jesus is quoted employing a key concept in Matthew when he proclaims that *"blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."* (5:6). Righteousness (*dikaioyne*) means actively doing the Will of God. Righteous persons are those who long for the coming of God's Kingdom and who on the basis of that hope actively do God's Will. *"This longing is no empty hope, but shall be satisfied."* (Boring).

When Jesus teaches that *“blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy”* (5:7), he is referring to concrete acts of mercy (*eleemon*) rather than merely a merciful attitude. Such mercy is *“the divine attitude that embraces, it is God’s self-giving that welcomes, that leans down to forgive.”* (Pope Francis). The merciful will receive mercy from God at the last judgment.

Jesus again turns to the Psalms for his teaching that *“blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God”* (5:8). This beatitude is based on the words of Psalm 24:

- “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand on his holy mountain? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation.” – Psalm 24:3-5.

“Purity of heart” is not merely the avoidance of “impure thoughts” but refers to single-minded devotion to God appropriate to monotheistic faith. Faith in one God requires that one be devoted to God with all one’s heart, keeping what Jesus identifies as one of the chief commandments:

- “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” – Deuteronomy 6:4-5.
- “He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’” – Matthew 22:37.

The opposite of purity of heart is a “divided heart” (*“Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded”* – James 4:8), attempting to serve two masters (*“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”* – 6:24). “Seeing God” refers not to a mystical vision in this world, but the hope of the time of fulfillment that is to come (*“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.”* – 1 Corinthians 13:12).

In his teaching that *“blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God”* (5:9), Jesus is not speaking of a passive attitude but positive actions for reconciliation. To be declared “children of God” is not a matter of individual identity but the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Hosea, to be accepted as belonging to the true people of God and entering into his inheritance:

- “Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which shall be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said of them, ‘You are not my people,’ it shall be said to them, ‘Children of the living God.’” – Hosea 1:10.

Jesus pronounces a blessing to “*those who are persecute for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God.*” (5:10). Jesus will warn his would-be followers that “*if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*” (16:24), and many of his disciples would suffer martyrdom for their proclamation of the Gospel. Because of their commitment to righteousness, to walking faithfully as children of the light, they will experience the joys of the reign of God. This announcement of blessing to the persecuted continues when Jesus announces that “*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*” (5:11). This transitional section shifts from the third to second person, and includes the first imperative in the Beatitudes: “*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*” (5:12).

- “The holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh ... in order to become like their head, Christ. The only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God’s Word, enduring this for the sake of Christ.” – Martin Luther, 1539.

The Beatitudes are not merely ethical principles, nor is Christianity a “*scheme to reduce stress, lose weight, advance in one’s career, or preserve one from illness.*” (Boring). The Beatitudes are statements about the unique authority of Jesus and what it means to orient one’s life around him. They are a teaching that is rooted in the language of grace that Jesus embodied when he healed the crowds without any preconditions; they teach us what it means to live in the grace of God that frees us to serve God without fear, what it means to “*take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*” (11:29-30).

- “When his followers live by God’s standards, they are truly in a fortunate state of life, no matter what their circumstances may be, for they bring a glimmer of the joy and hope of the heavenly kingdom into the afflictions of the present world. Ultimately the beatitudes are nothing less than a portrait of Christ’s

own life. As an indirect portrait of Jesus, the beatitudes display the mystery of Christ himself, and they call us into communion with him.” – Mitch and Sri.

Hearing the Beatitudes in the context of the one that healed the crowds who would experience his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, we can understand that Jesus’ words are spoken in the language of grace, the liberating words of the one who calls us to follow him on a path that may at times be difficult and dangerous, but one that will lead us into that place where no obstacles or forces of opposition will separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. All of Christ’s teachings are spoken in this gracious language, which calls us to follow our Lord so that we may walk as children of the light and experience the abundant life that is our gift from the one who calls all people to follow his gracious words and walk in the ways of truth, mercy, and life.

Amen.