

Join a Radical Kingdom – A Sermon on the Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Throughout our world, the church, and our homes a common question is being asked.

People want to know if they can make it through the waters of life, and, if so, how. How handle the small little waves, and how survive the big storms which often come so unexpectedly...

People are looking for a way to deal with the challenges, the uncertainties, and the difficulties of life.

We want some assurance that the direction of our life will offer meaning and connect us to something larger than our individual stories. Something wider, something higher...

What are our guidelines in life? The silver lines on a cloudy horizon?

How do we move forward? What are we to teach and tell our children and grandchildren? Those are the age old questions, asked in every generation.

Those questions are, I believe, asked in the whole world.

Asked when we watch the news, read the newspaper, struggle with the challenges of everyday life.

We see the results of elections in a couple of countries these days. And we ask ourselves where the Christian values are when countries deny welcoming the strangers, when churches withdraw ordination rights from women, when every day 15.000 children under 5 yrs die from curable diseases? When journalists who reveal the truth are killed by bombs, or imprisoned while the whole world is watching on television or on the internet... When one ethnic group tries to wipe out the other? When people suffer in the most inhuman refugee camps without sufficient food, water, shelter, medicine?

How can we live on in such worrying times?

What do we teach our kids?

More often than not our attempts to live life do not make the news.

Regardless of whether they are personal struggles or family matters, however, they are just as real and of no less concern to God. Each of us could tell stories about

the questions we face, the challenges we confront, and the difficulties we must overcome. Sometimes we seem to succeed and other times we don't. What shall we do? What have we to say?

Most of us have been taught to meet the storms of life through power, strength, accomplishment, and acquisition.

We work to be rich so we can have what we want.

We seek power so we can take what we want.

We argue to be right so we can have our way.

We compete to win so we'll be respected and admired.

We want to be beautiful so we'll be liked and desired.

Any of that sound familiar?

Ever tried those ways of getting through life?

Those attitudes fill headline news, magazine articles, tabloid pictures, television, and our own lives.

They find their origin in the idea that we are to be self-made men and women, that we are to build ourselves up and make a life. We must be successful, beautiful, powerful and clever...

At least that's what many of us have been told.

For too long that has been the myth with which many of us have lived.

And in all that our Christian faith was the icing of the cake when it fitted, but not the daily bread on which we live...

Jesus offers a different way of moving on through life.

The waters of life, he says, the storms are something we will make it through. But it's not through power, strength, accomplishment, or acquisition.

The way forward is not the way we've always done it.

It is not enough for us, as believers and followers of Jesus, to simply change a little piece of our world or life. It is not enough to just reform a political or economic system.

Managing life, living it in love and dignity, and in true trust of God, is not about overcoming circumstances or other people.

It is about overcoming ourselves.

If you want to know what overcoming yourself looks like then look at the beatitudes.

- Blessed are the poor in spirit.
- Blessed are those who mourn.
- Blessed are the meek.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
- Blessed are the merciful.
- Blessed are the pure in heart.
- Blessed are the peacemakers.

- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

That is how we can manage life?

Who wants to be poor, we may ask, who wants to be unhappy, weak, hungry?
Who?

But that is how the words of Jesus suggest we meet the challenges, the uncertainties, and the difficulties of life. That is what we are to teach our children and grandchildren.

A lifetime of living the beatitudes day after day, year after year, is how we overcome ourselves.

The beatitudes are not simply Jesus' helpful hints for happy living.

They are describing to us God's mind and Jesus' heart.

They are kingdom values and reveal what kingdom life is like.

They shape and form our lives and longings to be like God's life and longings.

That's a pretty different approach.

Most of the time we twist and distort God's life and longings to fit ours.

That's why the beatitudes are so radical and often seem so out of reach.

As we hear Jesus' words and consider the beatitudes it's easy to look at ourselves and say, "That is not me, that is not the world, that is not even the church."

You are right, it's not. We tend to look at what we are not. God, however, focuses on what we can become, who we are called to be.

The temptation is to think that the beatitudes are rules or conditions for being blessed or receiving our heavenly reward. They are not that at all. They are not about building up, accomplishing, or acquiring.

They are about letting go, surrendering, living with a vulnerable and open heart.

That does not mean we run away, back down, or isolate ourselves from the realities of our life and world. It means we engage them in a different way, in Jesus' way.

The beatitudes teach us to trust God more than the external circumstances of our lives. They invite dependence on God rather than self-reliance.

In today's world that sounds a lot like weakness and foolishness.

That's what it sounds like in every age.

But to those who are being saved it is the power of God.

God chose what is foolish to shame the wise and what is weak to shame the strong.

The beatitudes are nothing less than the way of the cross. The fullest expression of a "life according to the recipe of the beatitudes" is seen in Jesus' crucifixion. If we live the beatitudes they will take us to the cross.

In the trauma and setbacks of life we discover that we cannot do life by ourselves. As we admit our need of God we find purity of heart.

The arrogance of self-sufficiency gives way to meekness.
We realize that all that we are and have is from God and we begin to know ourselves as poor in spirit.

Our own misfortunes awaken and connect us to the pain of the world for which we cannot help but mourn.

We think less about ourselves and become merciful to others.

We have nowhere else to go and so we turn our gaze back to God. The longer we gaze at God the more we hunger and thirst for righteousness, for God's life, and we become peacemakers reconciling ourselves to God and our neighbour.

This is the life for which Christ's disciples are willing to be persecuted, a life of righteousness, the life for which Christ died and rose again.

The beatitudes are not so much about **what** we do, but about **how** we do things, about our **being**.

They are less about actions and more about relationships.

To live the beatitudes is to live a life of reckless, exuberant, self-abandonment to God and our neighbour.

That's called love.

The only reason we can do that is because we know and trust ourselves to have already been blessed by God.

We live the beatitudes as a response to God blessing us.

That is the way of Christ. The way through this world full of worries, challenges and questions.

That it is the way to life.

If we want to follow Christ it is our way...

Jesus calls us to join a radical kingdom.

He gives us a radical vision:

that the kingdom of heaven is already here – around us – near us, with us.

It has to do with us... with the way we live and act...

It needs us to be built and cared for...

We can continue fishing for people, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom at great cost to ourselves, fighting oppressive powers in Jesus' name. We can suffer for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, with the assurance that God has the last word. When we see people letting God into their lives, and finding healing and freedom in Jesus' name we know that, "the kingdom of heaven has drawn near."

Let us taste and see it, when a little later in this service we share bread and wine...
Amen.