

“Blessed Are...”
Prepared by Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur
for Berkeley Chinese Community Church
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⁶ ‘With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’
⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?



Micah 6:6-8

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. {2} Then 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. {12} Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5.1-12 (NRSV)

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Ever since I could remember, there's always been a world out there and a world in here <gesture to heart>. When I was really little...the world was home - I spoke Toisan; I ate rice and meat and vegetables for every single meal; I ate with chopsticks and rice from a bowl. When i started school and ventured out into the world out there -

I found out that not everyone spoke Toisan or ate the same kind of food as I did. Not everyone was expected to greet their elders with polite hellos as soon as you saw them. I thought I was alone. I thought no one else led that kind of life. I was wrong!

Lots of folks experienced life that way - the world out there and the world at home - different. And it wasn't just my Chinese friends or my Asian friends or ethnic friends! I found out that even my so-called all-American friends often experienced life in this way.

One in particular tells this story about her life. When she was growing up she thought she had perfectly normal parents. They were, after all, her parents and she thought that other families were just as peculiar as hers, but in different ways. As she ventured out into the world out there she realized that while they were "normal" in a great many ways they were also extremely eccentric.

And it was their eccentricities not their normalcies that made them wonderful parents. Her parents participated in protests and marches. Her parents did not serve grapes for most of her growing up life.

One night, when she was about five years old her parents and her brother and she – were sitting around having a typical once-a-month special dinner - a picnic in the living room. Rugs were rolled up, furniture was moved, and the best part - the most memorable, most special part - was that the menu was take out food or junk food and soda!

So on this particular indoor picnic night they were sitting around eating fish and chips and her parents started explaining what it means to be a Christian.

So picture yourself at five or six hearing your parents tell you that being a Christian isn't about believing in a creed or a statement of faith... it isn't about belonging to a particular group of people in a particular church in a particular denomination. NO! Being a Christian, your parents tell you, is that you are called to live in this world, but not be of this world.

"What?!?!?" She blurted out - "You mean I didn't have to memorize all those Bible verses for Sunday School?"

Her parents continued to tell her that if memorizing those verses helped you to actually follow them in everyday life...then memorizing them was a good thing! To her parents, being a Christian was not so much what you believed, but how you acted out that belief in the world.

This story to me is the heart of today's gospel reading. All those Blessed Are's - this is seen through God's eyes - conveyed by Jesus to his disciples. Statements made in a time when the world saw as Blessed...those who have family, home, land, crops, offerings to the temple. The world says you are blessed when you have "stuff" - prestige, power, a fine reputation! Not unlike today! Don't we often thank God for our many blessings.....what definition are we using? What are the blessings?

So, rewind - back two thousand years - Jesus comes along and says,
- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

- Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Someone once said - these words, known as the Beatitudes serve as the "Constitution of Christ's Kingdom". These are pretty radical words - to be spoken in a society where the opposite was true. No wonder Jesus was seen as a threat to those in power. No wonder he was seen as a subversive. In this passage often known as the Beatitudes - Jesus was asking his disciples to see the world as God sees the world.....to see beyond the world's values and see God's...Blessed are.....

But the funny thing is - this is nothing new...there's the Hebrew scripture reading from Micah this morning. Micah was one of the minor prophets - a contemporary of Isaiah's - he lived about 700 years before the birth of Jesus. He was the one who prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem...he was the one who warned Jerusalem to change its ways - from corruption to purity - to do good - he was the one who said all the Lord wants is for people to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

It seems to me that the Matthew passage records Jesus' encouragement with some specific descriptions about how to do that!

So what do Jesus' teaching of the disciples and the eccentric parents have to do with us today? Well, it probably hasn't escaped anyone's notice that the church isn't the center of society that it once was. The values that the dominant culture promotes and the values that the church promotes are pretty far apart. And by the way, the church itself has multiple personalities - There's the "Church" that the media reports about...the church that condemns and judges and the Churches that are more about following the compassionate and loving ministries of Jesus! We get the impression that the culture "outside" the church says that the merit of a person is often determined by their financial net worth, that someone's character is determined by the kind of car they drive or by where they live, and that those who are deemed worthy by society - are entitled to a bigger share of the world's goods and resources.

And then there's the culture "inside" the church - Inside the church the culture is the opposite. It's the place where everyone is treated the same regardless of their financial status, the quality of their home (or lack of a home at all). This is the place where it doesn't matter how you get here, or what you can give us when you do. This is also the place where everyone is welcome at the same table, and can receive the same loving and transforming grace of God.

How appropriate that today is Health and Human Services Sunday! It's a Sunday that the UCC takes seriously - for it's a justice issue. Did you know that the motto of the US

Department of Health of Human Services is "Improving the health, safety, and well-being of America"? Sometimes it's a challenge to figure out how some of the laws that are passed in Congress about health and human services are ways to improve the health, safety and well-being of America! And the UCC responds with advocacy in Washington and motivating churches and people in the pews to "educate" our lawmakers about the plight of their constituencies.

That's what it means to live in the world, but not of it, isn't it? Isn't that what it means to call ourselves Christians? Isn't that what it means to continue the work of Christmas? Doesn't it mean that we carry the "inside" church values into the world "outside"? Yes - we do come together here on Sunday mornings to worship and share fellowship, and listen for God's inspiration for the week to follow but we also know that there is more to being a Christian than where we are or what we do on Sunday morning.

When I look at our world today I think that it might be a bigger challenge to be a Christian than it has been in years past. We don't live in Christendom anymore...our church doesn't have the exclusive sanction of the government. In some places, we can't talk about God or Jesus.

The world is becoming still much more commercially based – more parts of our lives are determined by the economic markets of the world.

- The world advocates acquisition – getting more and bigger and better things at any cost.
- The world advocates violence – we go to war and launch bombs rather than pursue nonviolent means to conflict resolution.
- The world says that we can make it on our own, as individuals, without the need for others to walk with us through this life.
- The world has no place for faith and religion and church...some would say because these things don't make money or help us get stuff or power.
- The world tells us to be suspicious of those who don't dress like us or worship like us or whose families come from different parts of the world - especially since the horrors of 9-11.

So imagine this - a teaspoon - the kind of spoon you eat ice cream with or cereal with. Now imagine - 5 teaspoonsful of rice.

That's what most of the world's people eat for one meal – five teaspoons of rice.

The average person in the "developed" world, that includes most of the people in the United States, eats an average of two pounds of food in a meal! So remember the 5 teaspoonsful of rice and remember what you ate for your last meal.

That discrepancy, that some are entitled to plenty and others must suffer want, is the world that we are challenged to work against. This is the world that the eccentric parents said that Christians don't belong to, and this is the world that Jesus was preparing the disciples to work in. The disciples needed to see the world through God's eyes. Blessed Are.....

You see, it was no different in Jesus' time – sure the economic market then wasn't determined by dot com companies, it was determined by those who changed money and sold sacrificial animals in the temple; the in-group wasn't determined by house size or car type, but by strict religious rules that said some people were ritually unclean and therefore something like non-existent in the eyes of God.

For Jesus' first disciples, the struggle was the same as the one we face today – rejecting the values of the dominant society and embracing the values of Jesus Christ. It's all well and good to say that we're called as Christians to reject the powers and structures of the world, but what good does it do us?

Honestly? it probably doesn't do us much good at all. It won't make you rich and powerful and it certainly won't make you popular among the people who are rich and powerful. Rejecting the world's value system will not be easy. So, why do it at all?

We do it, each of us in our own way, because of the life and ministry of Jesus! We do it because of our commitment to following Jesus...it means we live as the body of Christ in the world...it means we will be guided by all that Jesus did to break down the social and religious barriers of his day - remember? He ate with tax collectors, sinners and prostitutes!

Why? We do this because whenever we come to God's table we get a glimpse of God's vision for unity and plenty that God promises the world. Why do we reject the powers of our day? Because we know that health and wholeness is indeed a possibility for creation.

Together, we can stand firm in our commitment to renounce the values of the world and affirm the values of Jesus - each in our own way...and it's not about words and creeds, my friends - it's about living them!

The world says that there are those who are important and those that are worthy of food and drink; the Christian world says that God's table is open to all and that everyone is welcome to eat until they're full and drink until they're happy.

If we do this – if we live out the values of Jesus instead of the values of the world, if we see the world through God's eyes – we have the opportunity to create something so amazing that we cannot even begin to understand.

We have the incredibly powerful potential to bring the kingdom of God a little closer. Living the "inside values" in the outside world is difficult work and may be dangerous, but the reward is that we risk becoming the people we claim we are. If we struggle towards becoming God's beloved community as we are called to do, we leave the world a better place for those who will come after us and that is all the legacy we need to leave....to bring the world closer to one where "Blessed Are... ALL." May it be so.....Amen.