



Sermon on the Mount: Beatitudes Matthew 5:1-12

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Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, God our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A few weeks ago, we talked about Jesus as the Great Teacher, that's how the disciples understood him. And in the Gospel of Matthew, you sort of have two things going on: you have narrative or story about Jesus's life, he went here, he healed this person, these people conspired against him, etc. But then interspersed within that narrative you have Jesus's teachings, or courses as I suggested we think about it. "So far in Matthew, [we've basically heard all about how] Jesus has prepared for his ministry. He has been baptized. He has been tempted by Satan. He has called his first four disciples. [But up until this chapter, we've mostly been reading stories *about* Jesus. Now is the first time we get to hear what Jesus has to *say*.] He turns to teaching his disciples (the first time they are called such in the Gospel)..."¹ And, at least in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus decides he's going to take us all to school.

And so I thought, for a few weeks, we would take a look at the first Gospel, the Gospel of Matthew, and enroll in the first course that Jesus teaches, commonly referred to the Sermon on the Mount. This is Intro to Jesus, Jesus 101, the first class for all the wanna-be Jesus majors, and on the first day of class, what does Jesus do? Does he go over the syllabus, talk about, you know, excused absences or the final exam? No, Jesus jumps right in the lesson plan with what we call the Beatitudes. The word *beatitude*, by the way, comes from Latin and is just a fancy way of saying the words *beati sunt*, or "blessed are."

So the Beatitudes is Day #1 of class. "...and the first word out of [Jesus's] mouth is the word "blessed." [Not a bad way to begin.] Jesus repeats this word throughout his first sermon, as if people need to hear it more than once. Through this blessing he's

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-51-12-9>

introducing himself to disciples and to those gathered, he's telling them who he is and what his ministry is going to be. [And the picture we get is nothing like what we could have expected or heard before.] The first four beatitudes describe those in need of help: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The second four beatitudes describe those who help them: the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Then, in verse 11, everyone, both the helped and the helpers, are swept up in bracing direct address: "Blessed are YOU."² It's a startling introduction, intentionally throwing everything we might have assumed about who is blessed and who isn't on its head, and it probably sounded as radical to the people of the time as it still does to us.

But it might be that the word "blessed" isn't exactly what Jesus was saying, or maybe more accurately, what Matthew is saying that Jesus said. Because the word we translate as blessed could mean a lot of different things. It can mean blessed, and that's correct, that's what the Beatitude means, Stacy, you said that earlier, *blessed are*. Yes, that's still true. But that's not the only thing it can mean. The first word used in each of the Beatitudes, *makarios*, is a fairly common word in scripture and in ancient Greek, but it can be difficult to translate into English. One New Testament scholar says a better translation might be "greatly honored."³ The word can also mean "fortunate" or "well-off." And yet there's another, perhaps more controversial, word that *makarios* can mean.

I mentioned to you all a few weeks ago that I am not an artist, and I don't really have a keen eye for "good art." I tried, you know, and as I endeavored to decorate my house back in Memphis, I tried to collect things to make it interesting and beautiful. Mostly I hung art pieces done by my friends, and maybe a few pictures I found at a street fair. But according to my arty friends, the best way to find good art was to stay from "corporate art." You know, those pre-framed pieces of leaves or rainbows or antique cars, we all have them, we love them. I was just in Niagara Falls this weekend with my friends from Texas, and the rental house we stayed at had these pre-framed images of a toilet, hanging over the toilet, as if to teach us both that this is the toilet and to celebrate it at the same time. And to me, there is nothing wrong with buying an art piece off the rack and hanging it on the wall. If you like it, you like it, that's the thing about art. But according to the artists I have befriended, heaven forbid that I bring home some generic

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/sermon-development/first-words-what-the-beatitudes-tell-us-about-jesus-as-a-preacher>

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/all-saints-sunday/commentary-on-matthew-51-12-6>

piece from Target or Bed Bath and Beyond or something that I like simply because the green is nice and it matches the rug.

But a few years ago, I stunned us all. I was wandering around Pier One and saw a reprint of a cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* from 1968, and the image was huge and colorful and beautiful and happy. And I noticed that it was the words of the Beatitudes. How often do you see Pier One art of the Beatitudes? So I bought it, didn't even know a thing about it, but I loved it.

And since then I have come to learn that it is a reprint of a much larger piece done by a Roman Catholic artist named Sister Corina Kent. *If we had a screen or a color printing budget I would have reproduced this for you, but just Google it when you get a chance.* Sister Corita was influenced by Rauschenburg and Andy Warhol and did these beautiful, colorful images of the Beatitudes for the opening of Second Vatican Council in the early 1960's. The original banner was 40 feet long, and then the *Saturday Evening Post* kind of combined them into one image and reprinted them on the cover of their magazine. And about 40 years later, I guess the image made some corporate art guru at Pier One happy, and they reprinted it – maybe not even knowing the full impact of the piece, or Sister Corita herself.

My friend, the Rev. Mary Button who I spent my birthday with at the Corning Museum a few weeks ago, is herself a liturgical artist and wrote about Sister Corita a few years ago. She says, "Religious art [often] conjures up images of Michelangelo lying on his back, way up high on scaffolding, wiping sweat from his eyes, painting The Sistine Chapel. Or gilded altars in Bavaria. Or the dark, brooding images of St. Peter's crucifixion by Caravaggio. Our preconceptions of religious art are, all too often, intricately tied up in our societal definitions of what art is and what it isn't. If it's old, European and precious it's Art; likewise if it's modern, expensive and inscrutable it's Art. For me, [she says], the very epitome of religious art has always been the day-glo color poetics found in the work on Sister Corita Kent.

"An innovative artist working in a pop art vernacular, [Sister Corita] was also the chair of the art department at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles and a practicing nun... [Her] work directly engaged with her community and is still a powerful, plaintive cry for social change."⁴ She was commercially successful; in addition to the Beatitudes one of her most famous works is the "Love" postage stamp from 1985. But she also produced art that juxtaposed contemporary headlines with religious thought, like her piece *my people* that used the text from the LA Times about the Watts riots and a quote from a priest who was removed from his parish in Selma, Alabama, after the

⁴ <https://blogs.elca.org/worldhunger/sister-corita-kent-an-artist-who-lives-the-body-of-christ/>

archbishop found him to be “too supportive” of the civil rights movement. “She was called ‘the joyous revolutionary’ by the artist Ben Shahn, and “[she] used art to protest and comment on the state of the world around her,... issues like the Vietnam War, poverty, racial injustice, and gender inequality.”⁵ Her works, Mary says, were calls of action.

But this is the reason why I’m skeptical that our Pier One buyer really knew much about Sister Corita. Because, a practicing nun who makes art about the Watts Riots is not exactly a great candidate for some corporate art. I think the real reason why this piece got into mass production is because it is so “Happy!” And it’s not just the colors or design; she uses the translation of the word *makarios* as our word Happy. The word “Happy” is really what you see the most, what catches your eye as you walk past this image – what caught my eye that day at Pier One. So the translation is “Happy are those who make peace,” and “Happy...are you who know sorrow.” I feel like someone in corporate art procurement must have just seen the word “Happy” in bright colors and said, YES SOUNDS GOOD, but maybe didn’t quite have time to read further.

And we might not be 100% comfortable with this word “happy” in the context of the Beatitudes. It’s hard enough to see those who mourn, or are persecuted, or struggle for peace as blessed, much less happy. And yet it’s perhaps more accurate to use that translation. When this same word is used in the Greek version of the Old Testament, that’s exactly how we translate it. In fact, the very first word of the Psalms is *makarios* and we translate it as happy: “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked.” That’s Psalm #1. We see the same word all throughout the psalms and it’s basically always translated as happy; it’s used in Job: “happy is the one whom God reproves;” and Isaiah, “Happy is the mortal who does this,” and Daniel: “Happy are those who persevere.”

So we might prefer the word *blessed* rather than *happy*, but the problem with that translation is that, to us, the word “blessed” can be a somewhat unclear, perhaps even a little ethereal, which is exactly the opposite point of the Beatitudes. Jesus is trying to situate God’s world into the messy stuff of ours, so to say “blessed” when we don’t use the word “blessed” to describe our every day experience can be a little strange. We’re Americans, we seek “life, liberty, and...the pursuit of happiness,” yes, and happiness as we understand it is...well, not the Beatitudes.

But that kind of happiness is not what we’re talking about here in Matthew. It’s not what ancient philosophers meant, for they were well aware of the suffering and conflict

⁵ <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/how-corita-kent-fought-power-with-joy/>

humans experience. It cannot be what Jesus means either, or he would not call those who mourn “happy.” He is describing a deeper happiness, the kind of happiness that only comes from aligning one’s own will with God’s.

New Testament scholar Susan Hulen says, “The psalmists [who use the word happy] are quite aware that the wicked pick on, persecute, and scorn the righteous. So this “happiness” cannot be a simple feeling that things are going well, or that one is well-liked. These people are happy because they live their lives in a way that is oriented toward God’s loving-kindness. They see the world the way God sees it.

“Matthew is saying the same thing. Those who long to follow God’s word, who seek the righteousness, holiness, and justice of God, are “happy.” Other people may appear happy outwardly. They may be successful in the world’s terms... They may send their children to the best schools, [they might not need to decorate with corporate art from Pier One.] But that is not real happiness, for it does not reflect the things that are important to God.

“The word “happy,” [Susan says], focuses our emphasis on the present state of the people that are discussed here. While blessedness can sound like a future promise of good things to those who suffer now, “happiness” makes sense as something people strive for in this lifetime. Although they experience difficulty of many kinds, Jesus attributes a present-tense state of happiness to those he describes... The present tense suggests that the meek are happy now, but they are happy in part because they see the big picture. [They’re not happy simply because they are meek, or poor, or mourning.] Those whom Jesus is describing are happy because they live in the knowledge that the appearances of the world do not correspond to the ultimate realities of God’s kingdom...

“[And in the next class, on day two of Jesus 101: Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is going to share more about what the realities of God are, compared to the realities as we know them.] He’ll start with the commandments, he’ll teach about turning the other cheek and loving enemies. These teachings give depth to what it means to be meek, to be a peacemaker, to be pure in heart. Happiness is not simply a way of seeing the world as God sees. It is a way of life. It motivates moral behavior and deep humility. It moves people to seek justice and to love mercy.

“It is difficult to contemplate the brokenness of the world, and even more difficult to know ourselves to be complicit in its injustices. But happiness is never something that can be found without that knowledge. We can never be happy in the sense Matthew means by ignoring or downplaying the suffering of others. This is the paradox of

happiness: it sits face to face with the pain of injustice, sickness, and death. Yet it is still somehow strangely appropriate to use the word “happy.”⁶

But God does not stop there, simply blessing our trials with his holy love and comforting us when we need it most. Because our God is a God of both blessing *and promise*, and once we get our minds around being blessed, we can't forget the promises God makes to us in the second half of the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes offer us more than a just a reassurance that even when things seem hard, we will be OK with God. It is not just that we will overcome hardships through God's love. The blessing of this present time – that deep fulfillment and satisfying inner joy that can be experienced now in the living of our lives, the “Happy are those...” feelings that Sister Corina uplifts – is possible because of the promise to which the blessing is attached.⁷ We are made whole by God's blessing, and sent forth into the world with God's promise.

Friends, even in the midst of challenges, changes, cancers, sorrows - where in your life do you feel blessed? What promises of God have you felt upheld? Even when it is tough to put the words “Happy are...” to our experiences, we remember that is was a true Beatitude is, a time when our greatest challenges give way to a new understanding of what it means to feel blessed, and to experience God's promises of life. A blessing means meeting each other at the points of our brokenness, and conveying to each other our and God's promises of regard, presence, accompaniment and, above all, worth. We are worthy of blessing, worthy of Beatitude, worthy of happiness, worthy of fulfillment, for God Almighty has created us and called us to be people of both blessing and promise.⁸ Happy are those who know the blessings of our Risen Lord. May it be so, this day and always. Amen.

⁶ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/all-saints-sunday/commentary-on-matthew-51-12-6>

⁷ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002490/blessings_and_promises_now_and_then

⁸ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3020>