

November 1, 2020
“Blessed Be”

Matthew 5:1-12

The trouble with having two ministers in one household, particularly when both are creating orders of service for the same upcoming Sunday, is that just about every activity from brushing one’s teeth in the morning to turning out the lights at night is punctuated with service preparation banter. Organizing ourselves for today’s service generated an unusual amount of distraction from muffin-making and bathroom cleaning. Even worse, there were options to consider. John started it: “Are you doing All Saints, Reformation, or the regular Proper 22nd Sunday service for November 1st?” “What?” I replied, as I added the wet ingredients to the dry? The only assurance I could give him at this point was that it was Communion Sunday. “Well,” said John, as I swished bleach around bathroom fixtures, “once you do know what you are doing, I may want to look at your liturgy in case there is something I can borrow.”

Somewhere between an episode of “Escape to the Country” and a Rays/Dodgers game, our lines got crossed. I thought I wasn’t doing All Saints, and I thought John was. It turned out he wasn’t and I was. It became fully apparent this past Monday. I drove off to Campbell River, worked up the order of service for today, and sent it to him so he could have a look. It turned out to be a mixed-up blessing. As the Spirit moves, I was moved to focus on All Saints. John, meanwhile, was crossing the Jordan River. I hadn’t gone there. A few days before, as I was squeezing out toothpaste, John was thinking up suitable hymns related to river crossings. I didn’t get why. I did, however, pick up from him an evocative idea to surround the Christ candle with an array of candles representing the light of the saints. By now, I am hoping John has got to the other side, while I am happy we are bridging our faith journey with an abundance of blessings. It is amazing how John and I can come together from mutually different propositions

and find ourselves as one despite. It comes down to mutuality and love. We may take different paths to get there, but we arrive at the same place: God before us and behind us, God above us and below us—God with us. Reformation Sunday will have to wait for next time.

The Beatitudes (from the Latin “*beatus*” meaning happy and blessed) are pretty well iconic with respect to Jesus’ ministries of teaching and proclaiming what has been variously named as the Kingdom of God, Reign of God, Realm of God, and more relationally in our current context the Kin-dom of God. The Sermon on the Mount is a full three chapters in Matthew (Ch. 5-7) and as a whole reveals Jesus to be a man of extraordinary empathy, ethical consideration, and wisdom. There is some critical bantering with respect to whether Jesus was re-stating Mosaic law, whether he was creating new rules to live by, or whether his extensive teaching as recorded in both Matthew and Luke was a radical re-interpretation of Rabbinic law. While the critics may argue back and forth, it still remains that the Beatitudes are a beautifully crafted listing of life-generating, transforming, and divinely-inspired values to live by.

Why would I use the word values? To even go there is complicated and ripe for interpretations that can be life-giving or stultifying depending on context. I am always suspicious, for example, when “family values” is bandied about in political discourse. It can be such a loaded term, and by whose definition? It is also known that when individuals or groups of individuals experience a values clash, it is exceedingly difficult to come to an agreement or resolution. Once a core value has been established, it can become so deeply rooted and internalized that any attempt at challenging it can be traumatic and potentially and permanently divisive. When considering the Beatitudes as values statements, therefore, I think it is important to think about what it is that Jesus is valuing as he trades back and forth between a blessing and its projected outcome rather than giving each one a value.

It may sound rather obvious, but as we work through each blessing and think about what it is that Jesus gives value to as a condition of the human experience is named, I reach back to last week's commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. In their simplest form that is exactly how one can give voice to each blessing after blessing. But coming from Jesus, the blessings place a deeper and more radical pronouncement to Jesus' intention. Quite simply, Jesus is giving voice to the devastation of culturally-induced woes that were the real experience of those who literally were his neighbours. Jesus had the uncanny knack of seeing it all, and unearthing the deepest of hurts and human sufferings that were causing harm, injury and death for so many that he walked amongst. The Beatitudes are considered by many to be some of the most beautiful words ever spoken. They are also some of the harshest.

Think about those sitting on the slopes of the mountain listening to Jesus list blessing after blessing...a rain of blessings rolling out from a man with the courage to name their pain...a voice anchored in transformative ethics that must have been both painful to hear while yet claimed hope. To be able to gain the full sense of the profound brokenness Jesus is naming, one would need to be poor in spirit, drowning in grief, completely demoralized, starving for justice, desperate for mercy, innocent of malice or deception, oppressed by conflict, persecuted, derided, and despised. Is that what these people were experiencing? Was it possible that any words Jesus could offer them would bring relief and healing peace? But Jesus was completely with them. He walked amongst them laying his hands upon them and healing them. Everything he did for them put his own life at risk, and yet he would not stop. He refused to let anything they were experiencing be perceived as hopeless. "Rejoice," he tells them, "and be glad...there is a heaven and God eternally has in mind to bring you to heaven and heaven to you. Persecution is a human endeavour...it is not of God." Jesus reveals to them that no matter how de-valued they feel, in

God's eyes they are valued above all. Jesus offers words that everyone can work towards.

In every age, it seems to me, human-wrought power imbalances are crafted to enslave, round up, catalogue, label, and classify, with the intent of discriminating against. The sole aim of such power is to give value to some while others are oppressed. This is a mis-direction of human power that places self-interest above justice and peace and a value for all life. It privileges some and causes deep suffering for others. The power of God is radically different to such mis-spent human endeavour. God's power is fully life-giving for all. Something too many in our world have yet to work out. As it turns out, giving voice to Jesus' radical and heart-wrenching blessings is as necessary in our age as it was two thousand years ago, and indeed in every age. When we get to the Prayers of the People and a rendition of the Beatitudes for the 21st Century created by Rev. Becky Withington, UCofC, Washington State, you will understand completely what I mean. If we sit comfortably in our privilege, it is certainly time to re-listen to Jesus and be with the displaced sitting at his feet and within arms-length of his healing peace.

Here at Campbell River United Church you are living out a legacy of justice-making and healing ministries. You are active with outreach programs that help to combat hunger and poverty. You consider the issues that bring to light injustice and give of yourselves and your resources to redress and lead towards wholesome change. In attending to Jesus' teachings, gospel message, and ministry of healing peace, you are reaching towards a full understanding of what it is to be loving examples of discipleship and loving your neighbours as yourselves. Indeed, every action of yours that leads to a blessing fulfilled responds to God's wholesome declaration that all life and all creation is valued, beloved, and in the realm of God's care. Rejoice...and be glad! For you have much to live for and many blessings yet to give. You have Jesus' word on it! Amen.