

Lent C3

Sermon Series #3, "Walking with Jesus: What's Under Your Feet?"

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Central Presbyterian Church

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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.

Raise your hand if you want to be called "poor in spirit." You'll be blessed, Jesus says. Being "poor in spirit" is being rich with blessing. Another word for "poor in spirit" is "humble." That's got a good following these days. Humble- unassuming, self-effacing, unpretentious- a hallmark of the kingdom of God. Someone who's humble is taking Jesus seriously. We have lots of people today who say they are taking Jesus very seriously. Humility is Jesus' middle name. Even though he had great power, he humbled himself to the point of death on a cross. He was attacked, he was beaten, he was crucified, and he recommends we do as he did. Be poor in spirit.

But really. Everything in moderation, we say. Humility -- until someone embarrasses us, humility -- until someone throws a punch, humility -- until our life is threatened. Then we get to swing back, protect ourselves. Counterpunching is only fair.

Another word for "poor in spirit" is "at the end of your rope." Nowhere else to turn. No more resources. Surely someone would like to volunteer for that, for the opportunity to be blessed for how little they have. Not that they raised themselves up by their own bootstraps. Not that they were once poor and through hard work and determination they became successful and self-sufficient and achieved their dreams. Not the belief that God will reward them with wealth and health- that we can count our blessings like dollar bills. Those are not the blessed, Jesus says. The ones at the end of their rope- that's what blessing is.

We can go on. Those who mourn the way the world works, who are meek, who want to be right with God and other people, who are merciful, who are pure in heart- eager to forgive, who are peacemakers, and who are harassed, gladly, for being any of these things—this is what blessing looks like, Jesus says.

This is the kingdom of God. This is where God is headed- the new heaven and the new earth that is promised in Revelation. This is what Jesus inaugurated in his own life and calls Christians to value—these kinds of blessings.

Now, there is considerable criticism these days for what is called “political correctness.” “We’re too nice.” “We’re weak.” “We care too much what other people might think.” “If we say what we believe about others and it hurts, then too bad. The best thing is to be honest about how I feel and express it.”

But the kingdom of God is coming. It has already started. Mercy. Compassion. Humility. Peacemaking. Kindness. If there is a God, this is where we’re going. Wouldn’t it be a blessing to practice now what we will be living for eternity?

2.

Jesus went up on a mountain to preach these things. Like Moses bringing down the Ten Commandments from God, Jesus is the new Moses, announcing on the mountain where God is taking the world and what proper human behavior looks like.

It was not what his disciples expected. They wanted to be great again. They had a Roman occupation to overthrow. Their temple was serving itself, oppressing them and the poor and needy. The people at the bottom were sick and tired of being left out. Humility? Kindness? Compassion? Seriously, these were going to make a difference?

Someone needs to organize a resistance, someone needs to rally the troops and take back the country, take back the religion, and put the powerful in their place. That’s what people were looking for. That’s what people are looking for. And Jesus preaches weakness?

No wonder over the centuries the church has emphasized something else as more important- our personal relationship with Christ. The church, despite Jesus, wanted power, it wanted a place in the community. Christians wanted to be somebody, so being saved, being close to Jesus, became the commodity the church could trade in, the most important thing. Then it was easy to draw boundaries- we have a relationship with Christ and they don’t, or we have the right relationship with Christ and they don’t. The church became an inside operation, an interior operation, that was between the individual and Jesus. The most important thing was to get to heaven.

Actually Jesus didn’t make much of all that. Not as much as he did of this:

Blessed are the poor in spirit.
Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are the peacemakers.
Blessed are those who mourn.

Yes they are. Be like that, Jesus is saying. But that's only half of it.

3.

He really means "blessed are the meek," and "blessed are those who mourn the world's disorientation." They are blessed. God is with them. God chooses them.

We can hear these blessings as an order, a commandment, an expectation, that we will try hard to be humble and meek and compassionate. And we should hear them also simply as statements of fact. The humble are blessed. God is with them.

Do you find that confusing? It took me years to get out of the habit of hearing the beatitudes as prescriptions and instead hear them as descriptions. God is with the poor and the meek and the peacemakers. That's where God resides. That's where God sets up shop.

Many of you are participating in the book study after worship during Lent. The author of that book, Jim Wallis, is a pastor in Washington, D.C., and he has spent his life preaching to Republicans and Democrats and Independents, that God blesses the meek and the poor by being with them. They are blessed because they have God and God will not forget, even though everyone else does.

With all the blather that has been going on in the campaigns this year, for that matter in any year, Wallis challenges us to ask who is talking about these people. Who is aware of their situations? How do they figure into the conversation?

The same can be asked of churches. Do they hear these blessings as statements of fact? God is with the meek and the poor and peacemakers and those who forgive. Or do churches want to get back on top, reclaim their prestige and power in the community? "Let's make the church great again." Doesn't seem to match up with what Jesus is preaching.

4.

In the next few months you and I are going to make important choices. We are in the phase of the New Beginnings project that brings us to a bold decision on how we are going to interact with our community. These beatitudes are central to our decision.

If the humble are blessed- the ones who have no resources left for themselves, the ones who are forgotten and left outside, the ones who seem to have little hope- if these are the ones who are blessed, then when we choose the group of people in need in our community whom we will be serving together, we are also choosing to meet Jesus in them.

We won't be taking Jesus to them. They will be sharing him with us.

And that leads to a very interesting fact. If we begin to know people in our community that we are serving, if we begin to learn their names, understand their lives, see their concerns—we will be changed.

It may seem that we are bringing Jesus to them. It may appear that we go to work to bring them better lives, and we may help them with that, but in our service we will meet Christ in them and slowly we will be changed.

A church I know started to serve the humble and the meek and the very poor at a soup kitchen. They were great. They made great food. They served it with a smile. But after a while it seemed not enough. They felt called to eat lunch with their guests and as a result they themselves became guests in two ways—guests of the people they were eating with, and guests of Jesus Christ. They were changed.

There is a worldwide Christian organization that started in France called L'Arche. (*spell*) This is the French word for Ark, as in Noah's Ark. There are 5000 people in this organization in 50 countries. The members of this organization live together in homes or apartments as intentional communities. These people are devoted to creating small faith-based communities of friendship and mutuality between people of differing abilities, especially those who have multiple disabilities.

In other words, small groups of people, some of them dealing with serious intellectual disabilities and some of them fully functional and able, choose to live together in a house to create supportive, compassionate, inclusive community for all. A famous Christian author named Henri Nouwen chose to live in one of these homes in Canada. And while Henri was a capable, even gifted man, known around the world for his spiritual writings, his books on his experience at L'Arche tell how his life was changed, how his living was improved, how his spiritually was deepened through his relationships with what some would say were disabled friends. He discovered he was disabled, and he needed what that community and Jesus would give him. He lived with the blessed and they blessed him.

I am excited by our opportunity to serve people in this community whom we will come to know, and our lives, as well as theirs, will be affected, because Jesus, who is already working there, will be at work among all of us. Ironical, isn't it, that we will find there a personal relationship with Jesus, the one who turns expectations upside down.