

Sermon: Surround Sound Blessings

Year A, Epiphany 4

[Isaiah 9:1-4](#); [Psalm 15](#); [1 Corinthians 1:18-31](#); [Matthew 5:1-12](#)

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For some of you, you knew exactly what you were going to hear when you saw *Matthew 5:1-12* in the bulletin. But for many of you, when Mike began to read, especially if you weren't reading along, you kind of hung out for the first sentence. Ok, Jesus is in front of the crowds, he's on a mountain, his disciples are there, Jesus begins to teach. It doesn't really narrow it down. Plenty of stories in the Bible begin something like that. But the minute Mike said, *Blessed are the poor in spirit* (Matthew 5:3) you knew exactly where we were. The Beatitudes. You might be psyched. You might have a bit of a shrug, meh, the Beatitudes. But it would be unusual for anyone who attends church as regularly as you all do to have not heard them before. Indeed, they were a part of President Trump's inauguration, so church is definitely not the only place they come up. They're really prevalent in our culture. And for good reason.

They are the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, which we'll be looking at for the next few weeks. You remember from last week that Jesus calls his disciples in chapter 4 *Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men* (Matthew 4:19). He has called his disciples and now he lays out the big picture, the goal that they are all going to work for to bring forth the kingdom of God. The big picture as Matthew describes it begins with the Beatitudes.

But when it's something we have heard often, especially when it's something that's setting the big picture context, it's hard to hear it anew, to take it personally. It's a song we've heard so many times, it's hard to hear any more. So I thought if I dug into the underlying Greek in a few of them, you might hear something in the English version that you had not heard before. It might sing again for you.

To start with, "blessed" in Greek is *makarios*. It means a kind of joy that the ancient Greek gods experienced, the kind of joy that is self-contained, completely independent of the chances and changes we mere mortals find in life. Back then, they referred to the island of Cyprus, you know in the Mediterranean, as *hē makaria*, the Blessed Isle, because the weather and land and food and the people and wine couldn't be improved on.¹ You know when you're on vacation and you say "oh I could stay here forever". *Makarios* is the word that describes that feeling. I'm blessed, I could stay here forever.

That sense of being able to stay here forever almost amplifies the meaning of pure of heart, when Jesus says *Blessed are the pure in heart* (Matthew 5:8). Pure is a translation of *katharos*. Can you hear cathartic in *katharos*? Cathartic comes from there. We think of having a good cry. Or the tossing stuff in the trash can when the guy becomes an ex-boyfriend. My amazing gym guy taught me how to do round house kicks on the heavy bag. Cathartic. So *katharos* means pure, as in unsoiled. It also used when grain is winnowed, when you get rid of all the chaff, all the inedible debris that makes the flour less wholesome. And they also used *katharos* to describe a military unit that had been purged of all but the best warriors.² Blessed are the pure of heart. I could stay here forever with those with unsoiled hearts. Blessed are those whose hearts aren't

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975): 89.

² Barclay, 105-106.

clogged up with fibrous debris. Blessed are those whose hearts are lean, mean machines ready to fight for what they were born for. I could stay here forever with the pure of heart.

I could stay here forever with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6). Greek has a kind of neat trick that it can use with its word endings that we can't do in English. It works with a large class of verbs, but to give you a taste of it, I'm going to use "hunger". Who brought something for today's potluck? Anything. Perfect. Brownies. In Greek I can say "I hunger for brownies" or "I hunger for *_of_* brownies" which doesn't make any sense in English. But in Greek it means "I could some brownies." Or "I could have a bite or two." It lets me say, I just want a taste, I just want some. Not a whole serving and certainly not the whole thing. So when I say it the other way, "I hunger for brownies", it means I want way more than a taste, I want the whole thing.³ That's the way it's being used in today's reading. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. I could stay here forever with those who hunger and thirst for all of righteousness, with those who will not be satisfied with a taste or just a sip of righteousness. They want the whole thing.

Makarios can heighten the meaning of some of the Beatitudes because it's amplifying their meaning, it's giving them something tall to stand on. But it can also heighten the meaning because it gives such a strong contrast. *Blessed are the poor in spirit* (Matthew 5:3). There are two Greek words that are usually translated "poor". The first one is *penes*. Someone who works but doesn't have anything left over is *penes*. *Penes* means food, shelter, clothing and that's about it. *Ptochos* is someone who has nothing at all. It comes from *ptossein*, which means "to crouch" or "to cower." It's the kind of poverty that brings you to your knees.⁴ Think of it this way: you are poor, and because of that you have no power or prestige. Because you have no power or prestige, you are oppressed by other people. Because you are oppressed by other people, because you have no earthly resources at all, you put your whole faith in God.⁵ That is *ptochos*. That is poor in spirit. Imagine what this world would be like if it felt natural to say, I could stay here forever with those who have no earthly resources at all and have put their whole faith in God. Imagine what this world would be like if we all could say blessed are the poor in spirit.

Imagine what this world would be like if we all could say *blessed are the meek* (Matthew 5:5). Meekness or *praus* was a virtue, a sense that it has lost in English of late. For the Greeks, any of you who have been dragged through Plato and Aristotle will remember this, virtue arose when you found the perfect balance between extremes. *Praus*, meekness, was the virtue you developed when you found that perfect spot between acting from too much anger and too little.⁶ We can imagine what it means to act from too much anger. We just came through an election that had a whole lot of people acting from too much anger on both sides of the aisle. But too little anger? Those might have been the people who didn't vote or who didn't speak out so only voices we heard the ones at edges. So meekness is not being driven by too much anger or too little anger. It's also the word that the Greeks used for domesticated animals, animals who had learned to obey the word of command.⁷ Finally there is a sense in Greek of meekness banishing

³ Barclay, 99-101.

⁴ Barclay, 90.

⁵ Barclay, 91.

⁶ Barclay, 96.

⁷ Barclay, 97.

a sense of haughtiness, of acknowledging ignorance and being willing to learn.⁸ Blessed are the meek. I could stay here forever with those with self control who are willing to learn.

If the Beatitudes we have heard so many times are beginning to ring, are beginning to roll out of mono and into stereo and maybe even surround sound, if you're hearing them with fresh ears, then once again you're hearing the truth. You're not there yet. None of us are there yet. None of us has a pure heart, none of us hungers for righteousness, none of us are poor in spirit, none of us are meek. We may have flashes every now and again, but we're not there yet, we can't stay there forever. We give into the influences of the world of Herod and Caesar. We give into the seduction of commodities, of piling up stuff. Of asking our kids to call back because the news is on. Of waiting to be asked to take the trash out when we know perfectly well it would be helpful if we just did it without asking. We give in to Herod and Caesar because frankly, they're so much easier to deal with. It's hard to keep our hearts pure and to hunger for righteousness. It's hard to accept that we need to be poor in spirit. It's hard to even recognize meekness as a virtue we might want to pursue. We understand all the ins and out of the commodity game and we invest plenty of financial, social and emotional resources in playing it.

That's what God was saying through the prophet Micah. God says in surround sound to the Israelites, "you're dropping the ball" or, more precisely, "What more do you want? I brought you out of slavery in Egypt. I gave you leaders like Moses and Aaron and Miriam. I brought you to the Promised Land where you crossed the river Jordan from Shittim to Gilgal. What more do you want?" (Micah 6:4-5). The Israelites agree. They agree. They want to get back into right relationship with God. So they ask, what commodities do you want?⁹ Cattle, rams, oil? Through Micah, God says, "No. Commodities are what take you away from me." If you want to stay here forever, if you want to be blessed, *do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God* (Micah 6:8).

It comes back to meekness, that virtue of having self control and being willing to learn. Last week I brought up three questions you might ask people to learn more of what they knew rather than imposing what you know already. They were:

What do you want more of in your life?

What are you most proud of?

What was the best life lesson you've ever learned?

In asking those questions and really listening for the answers, you could begin to hear what potential new disciples are able to teach the church and the world. They are also great ways for us to recognize our own ignorance, to practice the self control we need to actively listen to another's story without interjecting our own. If we are to walk humbly with God, we must walk humbly with each other. To do that, we need to really, truly listen to one another. Because that puts us on the path where we can stay forever, where we are blessed.

⁸ Barclay, 97.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, "Walk humbly with your God: Micah 6:8." *Journal For Preachers* 33, no. 4 (2010): 14.