

Look Again!

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Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
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Text: Matthew 5:1-12

“Friends, don’t you feel blessed?” Those words boomed through the church fellowship hall, where so many guests had gathered. They had come in from the street on that cold March day for a hot bowl of soup and a little company. It was lunch on paper plates—not exactly the Ritz Carlton, but a square meal nonetheless. And many of the folks assembled there, I’d come to understand, were challenged in so many ways—Vietnam vets scarred by war, a woman who heard voices, people who huddled together at night to stay warm. But now I looked up and saw the man who had shouted this unlikely greeting over the crowd: “Don’t you feel blessed?” His name was Peter, and he was absolutely impossible. In the few days our group had been working in the soup kitchen, we had seen Peter feuding with the regular staff, getting into fights with other guests, and causing enough havoc one time that he got himself kicked out. Now he was back, grinning from ear to ear, with a joyful pronouncement: “Don’t you feel blessed?”

What made him say this? What did he see in that room?

In today’s gospel, Jesus also pronounces a blessing over people whose circumstances might lead them to think they are anything but blessed. Jesus looks out over the crowd that has gathered around him. They’ve been drawn to him because he’s a healer: “they brought to him all the sick,” says the story, “those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them” (4:24). And Jesus takes in this sea of hurt and longing and opens his mouth to say, “Happy you are, blessed you are—most fortunate, *enviable* even! You poor, you mourners, you are the luckiest of all people on God’s earth!”

What made him say this? What does Jesus see in the crowd?

The first two blessings are for those we ourselves might want to call *unlucky*. Blessed are the poor in spirit, Jesus says. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus just says, “Blessed are the poor,” but here he adds, “in spirit.” I think he means to include those who struggle with material needs, but also those who understand that they don’t have what it takes to come out on top. To be poor in spirit means to live with a throbbing sense that you *need* something that you are utterly unable to provide for yourself.

That’s not a choice you make. To be in need and unable to meet that need is just something that happens. But it’s not a situation we want to be in. So it’s curious, it’s perplexing that Jesus chooses to call the poor in spirit “blessed.”

Likewise those who mourn aren’t there by choice. They have lost someone or something dear to them, without which they know they can never quite be whole. We don’t want to be those who mourn, and so we cling fiercely to the people and things that matter to us. But Jesus looks at those who mourn, and he says, “blessed, fortunate, *enviable* are you.”

So many people spread out before Jesus are reaching up with outstretched arms. They are reaching out, whether they know it or not, to God, to the only One who can satisfy their longings and dry their tears. And Jesus calls them blessed, because he

understands deep within his soul, the character of the God their hearts are seeking. Jesus embodies God, carries God within his own person, and so he knows the deep care of the Creator for every creature. He knows the steadfast love that holds tight and won't let go that lies at the center of God's very being. And he knows that in him—in his life, his presence—God's kingdom has come near, and with it the fulfillment of God's promises. Blessed is the crying child who reaches upward for a hug—blessed not in herself, but blessed because of the strong hands that are reaching right back to enfold her.

If you are feeling a little poor in spirit this morning—or maybe more than a little—then this is the message I want you to hold onto today. You are blessed in your weakness, in your doubt, in your sadness—not because those things are good in any way, but because God's rich, generous heart beats for you. The psalmist sings that "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit" (34:18). When you hurt, when you mourn, God is near.

But all of us need to understand that Jesus didn't just say this. He spoke these words of assurance only *after* hours and days of moving among sick and needy people and healing them. And so as I read the passage this time, I noticed something. While Jesus begins his sermon by blessing those for the things they didn't choose, for the things that just happened to them, he moves on to pronounce blessings on others.

Blessed are the meek, he says, blessed the peacemakers, blessed those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (or justice). Blessed are the merciful and the pure in heart. When Jesus says these things, he sounds to me as though he's talking about choices and habits of character, more than uncontrollable life circumstances. You can *choose* to be merciful. You can *choose* to pursue justice or make peace. You can *decide* you want to be pure in your intentions and your actions.

Purity, mercy, meekness—these aren't what we see when we look around at who runs things, at the people who wield authority and power in our world. As our country moves from an impeachment trial to what promises to be a bruising election year, pointing to these things—to gentleness, kindness, and integrity—as reasons to count someone fortunate and enviable doesn't make sense. Yet Jesus chooses to call the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the hungerers for justice blessed, not because these things by themselves are sufficient to win out, but because again, they amount to hands stretched out to receive God's kingdom, God's reign. They make sense only because they depend on the faithfulness of a God who loves us and keeps promises.

The first two beatitudes are meant as a comfort. And if you need comfort today, take it. Jesus means that comfort for you.

But the rest of the beatitudes are a call to action, a call to a new way of life that Jesus himself is modeling right in front of our eyes. He didn't need to touch the sick and heal them. He didn't need to associate with tax collectors and sinners. And ultimately as the Son of God, he didn't need to leave the security of heaven to suffer the hurts he did for our sake. But he did all these things to show us what human life looks like when it's lived with arms stretching toward God's inbreaking reign. Jesus has the right to call us to faith, to trust that our outstretched arms will meet with God's embrace, because he's living in that place of faith, trust, and vulnerability himself.

What does that kind of life look like for us?

It means we need to look again at the circumstances in front of us. When Peter came into that soup kitchen and pronounced us all blessed, he wasn't just talking about himself or the guests—that's what struck me. He was talking about all of us. In that moment, whatever our circumstances, God had created a pocket of the world where everyone had enough—where the hunger for food and companionship was satisfied for

hosts and guests both—because we were reaching out with our hands, because we believed, whether or not we could put it into words, that just then God had brought the kingdom near enough to us that it could begin to take shape in that hall. And God put this prophetic insight on the lips of the least likely messenger: “Don’t you feel blessed?”

Look again. Look again at your relationships, your community, your workplace. What would it look like for you to live with *your* hands outstretched, as though God’s reign were near? ... Because, in fact, it is! God’s kingdom is near, and blessed are the arms that reach out in faith, in trust, in hope. Amen.