Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12

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Years ago, I had a very difficult conversation with a man that I respect very much. We were in my office and we were both in tears. He was talking with me about the difficulties in his marriage and that he was considering leaving his wife. He told me about all the problems and how miserable he was and then he asked me, "Don't I have the right to be happy?" Don't I have the right to be happy. Does he? Do we? Do any of us? Do we have the right to be happy? I don't think I know the answer to that question. What is it that makes us happy? What does it take for you to be happy? Love, money, success, recognition, security. When is it that you are the most happy? When you feel the most loved? When you have accomplished the most? When your children are happy and safe? When all your bills are paid and you still have money in the bank? When the Cubs won the World Series? All of these are great, but none of them are permanent, are they? Relationships have their ups and downs, recognition doesn't last very long, there are always more bills to be paid, and spring training starts in a couple of weeks and what have you done for me lately?

This first part of the Sermon on the Mount is known as the Beatitudes because of the repeated word "blessed." In Latin that is *beati;* in Greek *markarioi.* Some Bibles have translated this word to mean "happy." Happy are those who . . . But happiness is transitory, it is great but it does not last. Blessing is more than that. Blessing indicates God's favor. It means that God is especially close to those who are like this. Is that what we're saying when we pronounce a blessing? When I stand up here at the end of each service, I say a benediction—Latin for good words. But does that do anything? What are we saying when we say "May the Lord bless you"? Are we saying, may everything go well with you? Or are we saying, may God be near you?

But that's not what the world tells us, is it? Jesus says "Blessed are the poor in spirit," but all around us

we hear, blessed are you when you are rich. Jesus says, Blessed are those who mourn, but the world tells us that we are blessed when we are untouched by loss. Jesus says blessed are the humble, but all aound us we hear blessed are the powerful. We hear that we are blessed when we pursue pleasure and succes but Jesus says that we are blessed when we hunger and thirst for what is right. Blessed are those who show mercy, Jesus says, but the world says blessed are those who win by whatever means necessary. Blessed are those make peace. That's not what we hear around us, is it? These verses tell us that appearances notwithstanding, God is closest to us when we have most need of him. When we are poor, humble, grieving, when we see that the world around us isn't the way it is supposed to be. That's when we are closest to touching the Kingdom of Heaven.

Scholar Dr. David Lose reminds us that there is a trap hidden in the Beatitudes that I know I have fallen into countless times, and perhaps you have, too. The trap is a simple as it is subtle: believing that Jesus is setting up the conditions of blessing, rather than actually blessing his hearers.

Do you know what I mean? When I hear the Beatitudes, it's hard for me not to hear Jesus as stating the terms under which I might be blessed. For instance, when I hear "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," I tend to think, "Am I poor enough in spirit?" or "I should try to be more poor in spirit." Or, when I hear "blessed are the peacemakers...," I think, "Yes, I really should be more committed to making peace." At least with "blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted," I have the assurance of knowing that on those occasions when I am mourning I will be comforted. But, to be honest, that's relatively small comfort because the truth is I don't want to mourn, and hearing this beatitude doesn't make me any more eager for additional mourning. The same is true for being persecuted.[1]

Are we supposed to try to be these things? Are we to try to so humble that we are poor in spirit, or to work on being meek, or to be sad and greiving all the time, to work for peace, to be pure in our hearts,

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1 Lose, David. *Workingpreacher.org.* January 23, 2011.

and to let people treat us badly hoping it if for the sake of our faith? I don't really try to do all those things, do you? I think that is because we read this wrong. I think we are mistaken about the Beatitudes. I think we not only think that this is about being happy, but if this is happy we don't want to do it. That's because we think that this list is prescriptive. We think that this is a prescription for what we have to do to be happy, maybe not now but in the future that God has in store for us. And we have a hard time holding on until then.

But maybe this list is not prescriptive but descriptive instead. Maybe it just describes the people that God blesses, that God is nearest to us when we feel poor, or grieving, or hungering for what is right, or all the others. We are blessed when we feel the nearness of God. And maybe that's at those times when we need God most. When we pronounce a blessing, maybe we are not just saying, "May God be near you," but rather "God is near you, wake up and know it!"

Or maybe it's not that we don't know God well enough to recognize God's grace, maybe it's that we know ourselves too well to feel worthy of that grace. After all, we are intimately familiar with our faults and limitations, our insecurities and failures. And knowing ourselves this well -- and knowing that God knows us even better! -- we may find it hard to believe God loves us unconditionally. Very little if anything in our world is unconditional. We're used to paying for our mistakes, paving our own way, toeing the line and reaping the consequences when we don't, and so it may not only be unexpected, but downright unsettling and nearly inconceivable to imagine that God behaves differently, showering us with blessing apart from anything we have done, earned, or deserve.

But let's be clear -- or at least pay attention to the fact that Matthew is quite clear -- Jesus isn't setting up conditions or terms but rather is just plain blessing people. All kinds of people. All kinds of down-and-out, extremely vulnerable, and at the bottom of the ladder people. Why? To proclaim that God regularly shows up in mercy and blessing just where you least expect God to be -- with the poor rather than the rich, those who are mourning rather than celebrating, the meek and the peacemakers rather

than the strong and victorious. This is not where citizens of the ancient world looked for God and, quite frankly, it's not where citizens of our own world do either. If God shows up here, Jesus is saying, blessing the weak and the vulnerable, then God will be everywhere, showering all creation and its inhabitants with blessing.

A colleague of mine, Dr. Cleophus LaRue from Princeton Seminary has gone back there as a professor of preaching. I heard recently from a student there say that he has the practice of occasionally addressing students with the title "Doctor." When one of them objects that they have not yet receive their doctoral degree and shouldn't get called that, Dr. LaRue likes to respond, "Doctor, in the African-American church we are not content to call you what you are, but instead call you what we believe you will be!" Blessing. Unexpected, unsettling, nearly inconceivable, yet blessing nonetheless.[2]

I think that the Beatitudes are telling us that God is blessing us. Even when we feel our worst. Maybe especially then. We are blessed, you and I. I hope that we feel that way. Even if we aren't always happy, or successful, or financially secure, or recognized by those around us for being terrific people. Even appearances not withstanding, God is blessing us, as we are now, and as we will be.

In the Middle ages when someone sneezed, you said, "God bless you" fearing that they may have the plague. Those words became a sign of fear, of warding off evil or disease. Maybe we can reclaim those three words as a sign of joy, of life, of being called children of God. Maybe this is not just about the Beatitudes but is actually an essential element of the Christian life, the knowledge that God is a God who delights to create, bless, and redeem, and the reminder that we are God's own beloved and blessed children. God bless you.

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2 Lose, D.