

The Rev. Charlie Holt

I was asked, by several people whether I was going to cancel church today because of the, the blizzard of, of, that we were experiencing and, of course I said no, because this is the one day out of the year that you get to wear your fur coat, right?

And so we can't we can't, be canceling church on that one day. So I'm so glad to see all of you that that turned out. And welcome to those who are online. It's a it's a glorious day. I want to meditate with you on our beatitudes, which is a very beloved part of Scripture. There are there are nine, blessings in the Beatitudes and eight Beatitudes.

And many people actually memorize these. They, sometimes are read at weddings and funerals and, in many ways, the Beatitudes are often seen as just a standalone verse of Scripture, but they actually are part of a larger sermon that Jesus is preaching, which is called the sermon on the Mount. And in the Gospel of Matthew there are five sermons.

Matthew is the gospel that was written to the Jewish, hearer and the Jewish audience. And so he models his gospel around a pattern of five, which is very similar to in the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Bible. The law of Moses, which is, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, numbers and Deuteronomy, those five books.

And so, Matthew takes the pattern of five and, and takes five of Jesus's most significant sermons and orders. His book around the five. And so this is the first of the sermon series, the discipleship sermon. There's a mission sermon. There's, a, church community sermon. There's an eschatological sermon. I think I've skipped one, but I don't remember off the top of my head, all five.

But there's, five sermons. But this is the most famous of the five. The sermon on the Mount and you actually can go to the place where Jesus preached this sermon. It's along the Sea of Galilee. What the gospel says is that there was a large crowd that gathered, and he went up onto the mountain to teach. And if you ever do a pilgrimage to Israel, you can go there and stand in the place where Jesus would have given this sermon.

And it was a natural amphitheater on the side of this hill. We call it a mountain here, but it's really a hill, and he's standing on it, and it and it had, resonating qualities about it. There's a, a convent of nuns that, that maintain the church of the Beatitudes is one of the most beautiful places in all of Israel to go and really get a sense of the presence of Jesus and encourage you to go there.

But Jesus would have been addressing this large crowd. And one way to think about the Beatitudes is, is it was the introductory salvo to the what does it mean to be a disciple or follower of Jesus and what he's doing is he's painting the picture of the profile of a disciple. This is the kind of person that I'm looking for that you will be if you are to be a disciple, a follower of mine.

And, think about it. Here's this large crowd of people. And then he then he paints this picture of the profile of a disciple so that in a sense, the crowd would select in or out based on what they were hearing in the Beatitudes. If what you hear as you're listening to each one of the Beatitudes resonates with something deep inside your spirit and your heart and your soul, in other words, you want to find yourself in that and that description of the eight blessings.

You very well will pay attention to the rest of this sermon on the Mount and apply that into your life. So let's go through the Beatitudes one by one. And I, I'd like to categorize them. This is not there weren't any headings in the, in the Beatitudes. So I'm bringing some arbitrary categories. It's my own way of, of organizing them logically.

But in the original there were no, no headings. But I think the first is that there is this character of openness to Jesus that will be evident in the life of a disciple. And so the first of the three Beatitudes really manifest. And exemplify a character of openness to Jesus. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted, and blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Let's just think about these one by one. So blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. First of all, this idea of the kingdom of heaven. This is one of

the ways that we know that Matthew had a Jewish audience, because in all of the other gospels, when you see the phrase kingdom of, it's always kingdom of what?

Kingdom of God, right? But in Matthew's Gospel, he does what a typical Jewish person would do, any circumlocutes the name of God, and substitutes the word heaven there. And so he says, every time in Luke or Mark you would read Kingdom of God. Matthew would say, Kingdom of heaven. So he's talking about the kingdom of God.

It's the same phrase and in all the gospels. But what he's saying is, if you are of the kingdom of God, if you are a follower of the King, you will be poor in spirit. And blessed are those who have that character trait that is open to being called by the Kingdom of heaven, the Kingdom of God.

Remember the announcement last week of Jesus when he called the first disciples and he challenged them to follow me, pick, drop your nets and follow me? The message that he was preaching throughout Galilee was, repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand. It's a sovereign summons to enter into the pathway of discipleship and to give your life to him.

And so what kind of person will it be open to responding to that call? Well, somebody who is poor in spirit, that doesn't mean that you're, physically poor. You could be a very wealthy person and respond to this call. What it means is that you have a humility in your spirit of poverty, of your spirit, where you're not haughty, you're not proud, you're not, self secure and self smug that you would say to yourself, I don't need Jesus.

I'm just fine. Without him, I don't need to, follow some path to discipleship. I'm good. Thank you very much. But a person who's poor in spirit comes to listen to Jesus and recognizes that there's something deep inside of me that is a need, I need him, I need what he has to say. I may not understand everything.

I may not know all the ins and outs of the scriptures, but I know that I need him. I'm poor in spirit. And what Jesus says is, if that's your posture towards the kingdom of God, you're blessed.

You're on the right track. The next one, he says, blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

And I and I think this could very much be related to grieving over the loss of loved ones in your life. One of the great enemies of humanity that's described in the pages of the scriptures is death. That's our greatest and final enemy is death. And it will be the last enemy that is placed under the feet of Jesus is death.

He will defeat that one last. But, but it's not just a mourning over, this tragedy of human existence of death, but I think it has to do with mourning in general, that we live in a sinful and fallen and therefore broken world. And inevitably, if we are going through life, we will experience pain and suffering and loss.

And so if you are a person who feels that. Who sees it and feels it, and that manifests in your heart in a real way, as grief, as mourning, you're blessed. Because that's exactly why Jesus came to address that. That deep, heartfelt grief about of sinful and fallen and broken world. That is not the way it is supposed to be.

The second one is me, or the third one is meek. Blessed are the meek. This is probably the most misunderstood of the Beatitudes. I. I first heard that word I always I thought of it as like mousiness. You know, you're. It rhymes with weak, meek and weak. They sound like they go together. But that's not actually what meekness means.

Meekness, is translated in other places in the, in the New Testament, the Greek word for meek here is gentle take my yoke upon me. I'm. I'm gentle and lowly. Jesus says he's not saying I'm weak. What he's saying is, I am gentle. I, even though Jesus is the most powerful person who has ever walked this planet, you know that, right?

He's the most powerful man who has ever walked the planet. And yet he was the most gentle, a bruised reed. He will not break. A dimly burning wick he will not quench, is what the prophet said of the Messiah. He is gentle and the way that he manifests his power. Yes, he can calm the sea. He can walk on water, he can raise the dead.

I mean, that's power, but it is a constrained power. It is a power that has been brought under the control of his nature, his meek nature. And that is a characteristic trait of a disciple that will enable you to be open and responsive to the call. I remember my grandmother always used to tell me that I, I needed to be a gentleman.

If you're your mother or grandmother, tell you that. And she particularly had in mind the way that men treat women and she taught me I needed to open doors. I needed to protect the dignity and honor of ladies. I don't talk bad about women. And so. And so on. And there was a whole, training that went along with the idea of being a gentleman.

And the idea is, is that you as a man are strong. You're powerful. You, you can bully people with your strength, and you need to bring that strength into a type of submission and under control that treats those who don't necessarily have the same strength children, ladies, and so on, with meekness. That's what it means to be a gentleman, a gentle man.

And this is what Jesus is saying as a character trait of the disciple is that they're gentle. You can be a gentle woman as well. So there are a lot of women that are very powerful, but they have to bring that power and that strength under control and to gentility. And so, the next one is the internal character.

This is my next heading, the internal character of the spiritual fruit of the disciple. There's a hunger and a thirst for righteousness that will be there, that again, it goes back to that idea that things are not the way that they're supposed to be. There is there is a lack of truth and justice and honor and civility in this world.

I remember William Wilberforce. He was very concerned about two things in the state of England during his day that he made it his life's work as a Christian leader and man, he wanted to end slavery was one of the goal, and he wanted to restore civility to, British politics. He did accomplish ending slavery in his lifetime, but I don't think he ever got the end of, the lack of civility in British politics.

But those, that that's a hunger and thirst for righteousness that was manifest. And William Wilberforce's life and what Jesus says is when that internal character of that hunger, that drive, that thirst for righteousness is manifest, you are just the kind of person that I'm looking for to be one of my disciples. He goes on to say, blessed are the merciful.

That's the other side of that zeal for righteousness, because if you don't have mercy mixed with righteousness, you can be quite the mean person we know. We all know of the justice warriors of our day who, are all too ready to pick up violence along with their hunger and their thirst for righteousness. But there is this twin, character trait that has to wrap around righteousness, and that's also mercy and showing forth and breathing out grace and the character of, of loving and being concerned for, forgiveness and the poor and the lowly.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God again. These are internal character traits and spiritual fruit of a desire to pursue holiness of life and want to be, a follower of Jesus in that way, for they shall see God. So you have the character of openness to Jesus. You have the correct the inward character traits of the Beatitudes.

And then you have this last one, which I would like to spend a little bit of time on, the external character of our relationship to the world. And then this we have the nexus of the peacemaker and the persecuted. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. And blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Peacemaking is not the same as peace keeping. Peacemaking is actually a person who very much believes in truth and is wanting to see the reconciliation of truth and grace and love coming together. The ultimate goal of maturity in the life of the church is that we would speak the truth and love to one another, and in all things grow up.

And to Christ who is the head is what Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians. It's a it's a person who, who doesn't live by lies, as I said last week, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, but wants to reconcile people to God and people to one another. And if you are in the role of a peacemaker, inevitably you will be persecuted because, we are living in a world in which there are way too many peace keepers who reinforce the equilibrium of lying and do it at the threat of social shaming.

The threat of a sword. I'll give you a couple of examples. I mean, think about dictators. Many dictators have very peaceful societies, don't they? Why? Because everybody stays in line. And don't they don't ruffle the feathers of the dictator because the dictator has an army and a sword. And they know that if they ruffle the feathers of the dictator, then, they, they can find themselves disappeared or arrested or put to death.

And so they toe the line and they keep the peace and they live by the lie. Now, that's an extreme government example, but many families operate this way. Don't say anything bad about your relatives. Don't acknowledge the truth about that dynamic. Why? Because you're going to upset the applecart. You'll upset mom, you'll upset dad. I know there will be hell to pay if you bring that issue up.

And so what do we do in our families is we keep the peace and we live by the lie, and the equilibrium stays intact. But that's not peace making. The peace maker brings a reconciliation of truth and genuine authenticity of relationship to one another, where we're willing to have the hard conversations with one another and we're willing to, to bring the matters up in order that we might get to the healthier place with one another, and to live as authentic and faithful people under the lordship of Jesus Christ and of God.

And this is the aim of God in sending His Son, is that he would indeed upset the applecart of the equilibrium of the systems of this world, in order that that we might come to the realization that we are in desperate need of what he is going to be doing for us. On the cross. And so being a peacemaker is actually to take on the very foolishness of that message of the cross.

That's what Paul said, where we will we will live in such a way that we will take the risk of speaking the truth and love, even if it means that we will undergo the judgment and the wrath and the discomfort of others, even to the point of being persecuted for the truth and persecuted for the message of the gospel.

Now that, that doesn't sound like a lot of fun, which is kind of interesting that Jesus, has all of these eight blessings. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. And then he gets to the

persecuted one and he doubles down on it. He says, blessed are you who are persecuted for righteousness sake. Yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil things against you falsely on my account. And he didn't say toughen up, but he says, is cheer up when you step into the role of a peacemaker, you manifest the gospel in your life and are persecuted for that reason. Rejoice because you know that you are living as an authentic disciple of Jesus Christ.

You are on message and on task, and when you see it happen in your life, know that you're in the zone of a faithful disciple and you will be joining the ranks of the people of God. That down through redemptive history says, rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it this way with every beatitude. The gulf is widened between the disciples and the people of the world, and they're called to come forth from the people becomes increasingly manifest. The Christian life is one in which you will stand out, and Jesus will go on to say, you will be salt and light in this world and in being the salt and light, you will also become a target and cheer up in that day.

Rejoice and be glad because you're like one of the prophets. The, the question and I'll end with this, but the question that I think we all need to be wrestling with is, do I resonate with those beatitudes? So, like that movie, I'm looking for a few good Men or a few good women, but Jesus is doing as he opens up the sermon on the Mount, as he puts forth a portrait of a disciple, and he says, this is the kind of person I'm looking for.

And the real question is, do I do I see myself in that picture? And am I going to embrace that portrait and follow him?