

Trust the future. Act now.
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 24:1-6
Reading from the New Testament: Matthew 5:1-12

Perhaps you heard the story about Chester Peske this week. By the age of 98, Chet had survived the Depression, WWII, 40 years in the Navy, a lifetime of Minnesota winters, memory loss, and even a Covid positive infection. Yet, in the end, it was the loneliness that got him. His cause of death was listed as "failure to thrive." (NBC news)

One of the saddest side effects of the pandemic has been the sudden onset of frailty among the elderly in care facilities where the threat of infection collides with the physical and emotional toll of isolation. And that's just one of the stresses occupying us these days. This week, a nurse, my age, in the church I served in Morganton died from Covid and I saw that a high school classmate is on a ventilator with Covid.

It is an unsettling season. Full time accountants have taxingly added first-grade teacher to their daily schedule. Wildfires in the West and a parade of Gulf hurricanes taunt climate change deniers. Cultural

polarization. Electioneering insanity. Murder hornets! (*whaattt?*)

Murder hornets!

Failure to thrive! A San Francisco geriatrician spoke of her experience these days. She said, "Sometimes the doors to their rooms are open, and you just see someone sitting in a chair with tears running down their face." With the Psalmist, we lament, "How long, O Lord."

I wonder if Pharrell Williams light-spirited little tune, *Happy*, would be nearly so infectious in today's context. *Clap along if you feel that happiness is the truth!* These days, you might only hear the sound of one-hand clapping. *Clap your hands if you feel like a room without a roof.* What if you live in Louisiana right now? That's not so happy in a hurricane. *Happy*. I love the song. It just doesn't strike the tone of the time. To many, I suppose it could have all the effect of a Wiggles concert in a Wall Street boardroom.

Happy. I just want you to be happy! It's a nice sentiment, but happiness is subjective, fleeting, ephemeral. insubstantial, easily tossed aside by the slightest wind of bad news, unwelcome responsibilities, disagreeable people, bull-in-a-china-shop people, or just ... people!

Consequently, happy is not a word we throw around a lot in the church. We're shooting for something deeper, more substantial than that. You know, one of the common critiques of some modern church music is a certain lack of depth, seemingly dismissive of the suffering in this world or even the pain within the worshipping community. A former colleague called it *Jesus is my boyfriend* music. It's like, *He rose from the grave and he's cookin' up some fish now! Hey now! Hey now! My boyfriend's back.* I don't know, it just doesn't seem to rise to the power of *Our helper, he amidst the flood of mortal ills prevailing.*

There's certainly nothing wrong with happy, but our grace-giving God seeks something more for us - more substantial, more enduring, more real. Blessed may be a more appropriate adjective for God's intention for the human condition. The Greek word μακάριος can be translated either as *happy* or *blessed*. In a well-intentioned effort to translate the Bible in a way that is more approachable to a modern audience, some translators chose to use the word *happy* as the guiding adjective in our text today. But hearing the way *happy* is identified in our culture, I would agree with those who concluded that *blessed* gives a

better sense of the meaning Jesus is seeking to convey. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God."

Biblical scholar Fred Craddock prefers *blessed* as opposed to *happy* because it intimates "the objective reality of a divine act," rather than a "subjective feeling like happy." English majors will appreciate that *blessed* here is in the indicative mood, again showing that the blessing is a current reality rather something to be earned. This past summer I hope you had the opportunity to tune in to the videos of Rebecca's Bedtime Bible Stories. A highlight of my week was watching sweet Clara Guzman at the conclusion of each video making the sign of the cross on her mom's hand while saying with that lyrical wee little voice, "You are blessed to be a blessing." Rebecca, I hope you treasure that, and replay that on the Sunday of her confirmation, on her wedding day, and on the day, she too, becomes a mom. "You are blessed to be a blessing."

I believe this is the sense in which we are to understand this litany of blessings that begin Jesus' sermon on the mount, a collection often called by the Latin word for blessings, the Beatitudes.

The setting of the Beatitudes in Matthew is significant. "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them." What is Matthew telling us about the authority of Jesus here? He went up the mountain. That sounds familiar. Who was the other guy in the scriptures that spent a lot of time hiking up a mountain? Moses. By the end of Exodus, you wonder if Moses had an endorsement deal with North Face. And what did Moses bring down the mountain with him? The Law of God; the authoritative divine guide for the people of God. Matthew is informing the reader that we are about to hear words that bear the same authority as the Ten Commandments.

Then Matthew tells us that Jesus sat down. Was he tired from the climb? I hear stories of people climbing up to the rim of the Grand Canyon on a hot day, being on the verge of passing out. No, tired or not, the reason Matthew thinks it important that we know Jesus sat down is that this is the posture a teacher with authority would assume in the synagogue to speak and teach. Matthew is carefully establishing the authority of Jesus; that his interpretation of or addition to the Law is

authoritative; that when Jesus speaks, we are hearing the very voice of God.

Fred Craddock tells us that these Beatitudes are not to be read as practical advice for successful living, but as "prophetic declarations made on the conviction of God's coming and already present kingdom ... They are not commonsense observations based on this-worldly logic, but pronouncements on the blessedness of those who orient their lives now to the coming kingdom. They are not 9 different kinds of good people who get to go to heaven, but are nine declarations about the blessedness, contrary to all appearances, of the faith community living in anticipation of God's reign." (Fred Craddock, *The People's NT Commentary*) It's not a practical guide for individuals, but an authoritative description of an observed quality of life in faith communities oriented to inbreaking of God's coming blessed kingdom.

So, blessed are the poor in Spirit, for they know they are not self-sufficient and certainly not all-knowing. They understand our interdependence on one another and our mutual dependence on God, in whose kingdom, as it says in Isaiah, "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised

above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

Blessed are those who mourn. Well, that doesn't sound so happy, does it? But think about it. When we reflect on the lives of the saints we have known, even though we feel the loss deeply, there is a smile as we recall laughs shared and memories cherished. We are grateful that for them, the pain is ended, and the broken places are whole. But that's just a part of what Jesus is implying here. There is also a significant impact upon the church, the community of faith. We lament the way things are; we look forward to the time when "God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." This hope launches us into the kind of kingdom work that reflects God's ultimate purpose - seeking justice and well-being for those who suffer or are disenfranchised.

I don't know about you, but I am so tired of well-fed, comfortably housed, mostly white Christians complaining that they are being

persecuted in our country. No, they (we) are not. The love that is Christ compels us to be agents of comfort to those who are truly left out and left behind. We are called to ease their pain, and it is in that work that we find our meaning and live into our hope. "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Our comfort is true and lasting when all are comforted.

You know, don't you, that the polarities that plague us and the dark clouds of conflict that threaten us even now, would disappear if everyone would look, first and foremost, to the welfare of others. And how do we go about doing that? The beatitudes give a clue: In humility (meekness), understanding that the world wasn't created just for you or me, but with you and me in mind; in relationships that are whole and generous (i.e. righteous), merciful, and at peace.

The Confession of 1967 puts it this way. "In the power of the risen Christ and the hope of his coming the church sees the promise of God's

renewal of human life in society and of God's victory over all wrong. The church follows this pattern in the form of its life and in the method of its action. So to live and serve is to confess Christ as Lord."

In the same newscast that we learned about Chet Peske and the troubling and emerging diagnosis of "failure to thrive," we were introduced to Dr. Kris Spanjian and ICU nurse Joey Traywick. They work in the Covid Intensive Care Unit at St. Vincent Hospital in Billings, MT. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Joey has personally held the hand of 23 patients as they died, not permitting himself to chance that they would die alone; and when not on duty, he sequesters himself in his basement to protect his wife and three children from exposure.

Dr. Kris Spanjian, an anesthesiologist and trauma physician, had retired, but when the devastating early surge of Covid arose in NYC, she came out of retirement to go there and care for the stranger and bring healing to the sick. Now, she's back in Billings at St. Vincent, the same hospital in which she labored for 30 years, and working 13-14-hour shifts in the Covid ICU, embodying the blessing proclaimed by Christ. And guess what? She's also running for the Montana

Legislature where she promises to advocate for rural healthcare, land conservation, and public education. We shouldn't be surprised that one of her favorite things to do in the rare moments when she's not serving and bringing healing to others is fishing. What did Jesus tell Peter?

"Follow me and I will make you fish for people." For such is the life of the blessed. Thanks be to God. Amen.