

“Blessings in the World”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Part of the “Blessings” Worship Series
Edina Morningside Community Church; August 27, 2017

Matthew 5:1-12

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, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

The community organizer and activist Harvey Milk served as a San Francisco city supervisor in 1978. He was the first openly gay politician in California, and before his assassination he made a name for himself as a happy warrior enlisting people in the causes close to his heart. If you remember this time, or saw the film a few years ago about his life, you might remember his signature phrase. At the beginning of rallies and public speeches he would start out, “My name is Harvey Milk, and I’m here to recruit you!”

Think of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 along the same lines: “My name is Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, and I’m here to recruit you!” At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gathers with disciples and describes the life of blessing to which he is calling them. Remember that the first followers of Jesus were not the country club sort. They were the homeless, the beggars, the racially undesirable, the single mothers, the “deplorables”, those with a criminal history, and all those persecuted, reviled and extorted by Roman overlords or Jewish elites. They were a motley and discomfiting rabble, the sort of throng who thought of themselves as the cursed dregs of the earth. Yet here Jesus addresses them paradoxically, calling them blessed instead! Jesus doesn’t suggest that their *circumstances* are inherently good; there’s no special blessing in starving to death or watching your children do so. Rather, he calls them to remember that what they see now in their condition is not all there is to see, nor is it the last word on them as human beings.

Those who are truly Jesus’ followers walk in his ways of compassion, peace, righteous community, and resistance to Empire. So he tells his followers that—despite their circumstances—they may recognize themselves as blessed rather than condemned or cursed. You are blessed not in the bad things that happen to you, but when you follow the ways of life, death and new life that are the hallmarks of Jesus Christ. When you follow, as [one scholar puts it](#), “a life worth living defending the poor, comforting the mourning, walking with the meek, and struggling for justice for those to whom it has been denied.” This is why I prefer how the Beatitudes are translated in Spanish. [Rev. Jorge Lara-Braud says](#) that while English frequently translates the Latin “beatitudo” as “happy” or “blessed”, in Spanish the word become “bienaventuranza”, literally “good adventure to you”. Jesus recruits his followers to a “good adventure” of deeper faithfulness, where poverty, violence and oppression cannot mar the blessedness of God’s people.

What would happen if we could see ourselves and our lives in this way? Can you imagine Jesus calling you—from the cross there to us gathered on the gentle hillside of *this* sanctuary—to the great adventure of faith? We are in a time of dynamic change that the Church hasn’t seen in hundreds of years. Sure, there’s much that has been lost with the decline of Christendom, but there’s also exciting adventure to undertake as well! God has knocked the barnacles off the hull of Mother Church’s ship, making us smaller

but more nimble and responsive to the Holy Spirit wind. What does it look like to be blessed now, to be on the “good adventure” today? Part of the challenge—and the gift—is that there’s no ready roadmap for us. We’re called to *co-create* a compassionate, merciful, righteous and peaceful Christianity for the 21st century, a church that follows Jesus in blessing the poor, comforting those who mourn, and helping the meek inherit the earth. It’s not easy to trust the wind alone, but every ship that ever crossed an ocean had to sail away from the surety of land. That’s the quest of faithful, merciful, daring Christian life that we’re called to now.

It’s possible to live otherwise, of course. It’s possible to run out the clock on the last vestiges of cultural Christianity, just doing the things we’ve always done because we’ve always done them that way. It’s possible to sit idly by while communities change, the old ways decline, and this faith that once captured our hearts has become no more than a Sunday habit. It’s possible to coast through faith formation, as though our children or ourselves will grow in the Christian faith through osmosis rather than intentional study. It’s possible to let those who play Christians in the political realm suggest that all Jesus cared about was abortion, homosexuality and business-friendly deregulation. It’s possible, but then, why bother? Why show up at church on Sunday morning at all, or take the name of Christ for your own? That “weak tea” Christianity—which asks little and gives little in response—is fading away. Thankfully, that was never the faith to which Jesus called us in the first place.

Hear again what he says, and notice the action implied in all of it. Blessed are the *meek* and the *merciful*. Blessed are those *hungry and thirsty for righteousness*. Blessed are the *pure in heart*, the *peacemakers*, and the *troublemakers* for God. What Jesus calls us to, what he blesses us for, is such a daring, risk-taking, active life of faith. It is the spirit of Hunter S. Thompson, [who writes](#) that, “Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming ‘Wow! What a Ride!’” Such is the costly and “good adventure” of discipleship in the path of Jesus, alongside fellow travelers with whom we walk this faithful road.

So blessed are you, beloveds of God, when you take the risks of this daring faith, experience the costs of the road less traveled, yet find Christ on the mountain, blessing you to the “good adventure”. Blessed are you who do what others cannot, will not, or dare not. You who go out of your way to welcome a new face in the community. You who deliver Meals on Wheels even when recipients can be disagreeable. You who join in a community meeting to improve the neighborhood. You who toil in hidden ways to serve the joyful worship of God each week. You who teach youth to walk in the ways of Jesus, even when Sunday school attendance is lackluster. You who take on leadership positions in work, community or church, knowing full well the challenge of making decisions that others might criticize. You who make time to visit or write those who feel lonely and forgotten. You who have a naturally hot temper, yet choose many times a day to be gentle. You who march with Black Lives Matter or attend a community vigil to end violence. You who demonstrate humility and a desire for repentance of unearned privilege. You who give beyond what seems reasonable, from sheer faith that God will make all things possible. Blessed are you, because you are called blessed by Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, who is here to recruit us all. Good adventure awaits—thanks be to God! Amen.