

We have turned towards Jerusalem and towards the cross. That turning happened on Ash Wednesday. We had two opportunities to mark that turning and some of you came to the downtown historic district to receive your ashes, while others came to the gathering we had in the narthex on Wednesday evening. The imposition of ashes reminds us that life is precious and also fleeting, for we know that from ashes we have come and to ashes we will go. We know that over and over again throughout our lifetimes, the old will pass away and the new will come.

As we walk through Lent this year, we will be challenged to walk side by side with Jesus, leaning into what he has to teach us through what is known as the Beatitudes. These sayings are found in the opening verses of what is known as the Sermon on the Mount, which spans chapters 5-7 in the Gospel of Matthew.

The Beatitudes give us insight, a frame of reference, a world view of the way of Christ. These sayings are what the reign of God looks like on earth, the reign that was ushered in by Christ's coming. This way of living though is not for the faint of heart, for it is challenging and certainly counter to our American cultural; it is fundamentally life altering.

Let's place ourselves in the text and imagine ascending the amphitheater like hill near the sea of Galilee. There we will sit at the feet of Jesus to be taught the way of our triune God on earth... (Read 5:1-3)

On Thursday morning during Sunrise Lectio, when we are asked to let the word of Christ meet us where we are, I couldn't get past the word blessed. I was overwhelmed with gratitude on Thursday morning and the rest of the beatitude simply faded into the background. An image of someone dancing with delight in a spring rain among the abundance of blossoms came to my mind. Yes, I was overwhelmed with gratitude, feeling incredibly blessed on Thursday morning for my health, for this new call, for my new home, for my incredibly supportive family, for God's faithful provision in my life.

Yet, what do you see or feel when you hear the word "Blessed." What does this word mean to you? What does this word mean for your life? [Pause] What do you think this word meant to the disciples who heard this word, as they sat at the feet of Jesus? Part of our work as 21st century followers of Christ is to step into the world of those who first heard this teaching.

If we explore the Greek word, "*markarios*", which the New Revised Standard Version translates as "blessed," we find it can also mean "fortunate," "well off," or "happy." Some translations, such as the Good News translation start every Beatitude with the word "happy."

Yet, happy seems more transient to me, than what Jesus is getting at. Happy has a different feel than the word blessed, especially in light of these paradoxical sayings known as the Beatitudes.

This same Greek word used in the Beatitudes is used by Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the Magnificat when she said, "All generations will call me blessed," (Luke 1:48). We have to remember that her "blessedness" came from her "yes" that literally put her life at risk. Betrothed, yet unwed and now pregnant... her "yes" meant humiliation at the least and death at the worst. How could such a yes, result in being blessed?

There are other examples from Wisdom literature and prophecies which use statements of blessing in the form of Beatitudes as well, as in "Blessed are those who wait for [the Lord],"

(Isaiah 30:18)... how many feel blessed when you have to wait... or “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,” (Jeremiah 17:7), now this one makes sense!

Blessed are those... are you among the blessed this morning? Listen to whom Jesus says is blessed in this first Beatitude: Blessed are those who are poor...

Poor? What? Wait a minute! The poor aren't blessed! The materially wealthy are blessed, at least that is what our culture claims. There is even a brand of Christianity that espouses what our culture preaches called the prosperity gospel. The more you have the more God has blessed you. This works well for those who have and have in abundance, but if not, if you are struggling to make ends meet or tragedy befalls you, then this brand of Christianity would conclude that God has not blessed you.

Of course, this prosperity gospel is counter to what Jesus taught through this first Beatitude. Yet, is this what Jesus is really saying. He is talking about economics? He is talking about our annual income or the size of our 401k's? I don't believe so. Jesus is talking something more essential than our pocket books. Our first clue is the word “poor” is coupled with “in spirit.” Jesus says, “Bless are they who are poor in spirit.”

Yet, what does Jesus mean by this? Well, I don't believe Jesus means someone who is having a bad day or is downtrodden, depressed or struggling with mental health. Remember that this is the very first Beatitude of a litany of Beatitudes and I suggest Jesus ordered these with intention. This first Beatitude is foundational for understanding all those that follow.

“Poor in spirit” has more to do with the orientation of our heart, the orientation of our being, the orientation of our whole life and our communal life together than anything else. Listen to The New English Bible translation of this Beatitude, “How blest are those who know their need of God.” Those who are “poor in spirit” know their need of God!

Listen to this story that Mary Lou Redding tells about a couple who was living in Panama. This couple, like most military families in Panama, had a servant. Their servant was a 70-year old woman who had worked as a maid her entire life. The woman had always lived day by day, never earning enough to be able to save. She was also a widow without family to help support her. The military couple recounts that this woman spoke continually and joyously of God's goodness and faithfulness in supplying her needs – just as God was doing through the job working for this couple. The woman also acknowledged that she was getting on in years and would not be able to work indefinitely. Well one day the couple got brave enough to ask her, “What will you do when you can no longer work? Where will you live?”

“Well,” replied the woman with peaceful evenness, “I'll just go and live under the bridge with all the others like me. The Lord will keep on taking care of me, just as he always had.” The military couple conceded that this woman portrayed beautifully what it means to be “poor in spirit.” The 70-year old woman joyfully acknowledged that the same God who had given her jobs and the daily strength to perform them would continue caring for her when she could no longer work, even if she had to live under a bridge. She already realized that God supplied all her needs, so a change in her circumstances - resting her head on a bed or underneath a bridge - would mean little.

Do you know your need of God like this woman from Panama? Do we as a church know our need of God?

In our lesson from the Hebrew scriptures Elijah comes before King Ahab, who has married Jezebel, a worshipper of Baal, and announces to the king, “As the Lord the God of Israel

lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." In Canaanite religion, the faith of Ahab's wife, Baal the storm god is the one who brings rain and, thus, the possibility of life on earth. When there is drought Baal is presumed dead or at the very least asleep on the job! Elijah says effectively to King Ahab, "The living God of Israel is the one that will bring drought. The one that brings life or denies life."

We don't have the reaction of King Ahab in scripture, but it is obvious that he and his wife Jezebel aren't too happy, as God instructs Elijah to hide. Elijah's orientation is towards God. Elijah proclaimed God's message even though it put his life at risk. Elijah listened then for God's leading. Like Mary's "yes," Elijah trusted that God would provide for his needs.

Blessed are those who seek first the kingdom of God, who claim God's presence in their life, who put themselves at the very center of God's way and will. This Beatitude teaches us that we are blessed, when we totally rely on God, when we know that God is the one who will provide for us in all our circumstances. Blessed are those that know their need of God.

Yet, for those of us who have been socialized in a culture where rugged individualism and self-determination is worshipped, this Beatitude presents a monumental challenge for us. If we are honest with ourselves, we prefer being in charge, we like our individualism – my way, my likes, my tastes. We like to be able to self-determine the direction of our daily lives. We even like to manage our own spiritual lives. We like to decide what works of charity to perform or where to give our money. We, as a church, like to decide what ministry is acceptable, who we are going to serve, and how we are going to spend the money we have received. We like to be in the driver's seat; but this Beatitude teaches us that blessedness comes from letting God take the steering wheel, even if it that scares us and puts our lives at risk.

As I reflect on my own life, as well as the life of this church, perhaps we need to stop depending on our own skills, insights, and energy. Perhaps, as our quote for the day suggests, we [need to] recognize and acknowledge our absolute inability to meet even our smallest needs without God's help. Perhaps if we begin to acknowledge that all we have is sheer gift given to us by God, then we will be able to live more fully the reign of God on earth, for blessedness comes from recognizing that without God we can do nothing.

Listen to how Presbyterian Pastor Eugene Peterson translates this Beatitude, he writes, "With less of you there is more of God and his rule!" With less there is more... when there is less of my ego, and me, then more of God can live in me. The same is true for you and you and you, for Apostle Paul said to the believers in Galatia, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me," and this is surely the "less is more" way of living. This way of living means we realize that our identity and security is in God alone. This way of living means we understand the value of less of us is more of God.

This past Ash Wednesday was an example of less is more for me, as five churches came together to offer more of God to our community. We didn't worry about who we were or what church we belonged to or whether not anyone we met might come to our respective churches. We offered less of us and more of God. And were we blessed by Augustine as we prayed for his grandfather who is battling cancer. We were blessed by Mo and Charles whose son told them to get up and walk to Ed Hale Park to receive ashes. Both struggling with health and mobility issues, yet they could come to the city center briefly to receive more of God. We were blessed

by an Arrowhead truck driver who cheerfully said, "Cold water for ashes?" And then we prayed for his son, Rutger, who is at Fort Hood and for all who are serving in the armed forces.

I have to tell you that my experience of less of me and more of God was exhilarating on Ash Wednesday. It was out of the box culturally. Churches are supposed to stay neatly wrapped in their four walls. Saying "yes" to this Ash Wednesday experience put us at risk of indifference, ridicule and outright rejection. Yet, in the end, as followers of the one who is teaching us these Beatitudes, less of us and more of God is the way to live the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Less of us and more of God... Will you dare to live this way? Will we, as a church, dare to be in ministry this way, so that there can be more of God at work within us and through us. This is what I believe Jesus was teaching his disciples when he said to them, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Less is more! Less of us and more of God in and through us! Amen.