

“Dropping In” Privilege 2.2.20

Texts: Psalm 15

Texts: Micah 6:1-8

Texts: 1 Cor 1:18-31

Texts: Matthew 5:1-12

Introduction:

People of God! We're back in our walk with the Lectionary, that set of biblical passages that Christians all over the world are reflecting on this morning.

And today I do want to do something we haven't done so far, which is really focus our attention on one passage, while incorporating the others. And I want to focus it on that passage from Matthew, the one where Jesus says, “Blessed are the blah blah blah, because blah blah blah.”

For any of us who have grown up in the church, or in, you know, America, Matthew's passage isn't that unfamiliar to us. In Latin, “blessed” is “beatitude” and so we call these “blessed are you” statements “beatitudes.”

I want to look at each of them, and bring these important other passages, which are on theme, to play, too. And of course, I hope that for those of us who know all about these passages, that we see them in a new way, and those of us who don't, we get a chance to think about them more deeply, too.

Prayer:

On Beatitudes: "Privileged"

Let's talk about what a "beatitude" is.

We say "blessed" when we read them aloud out of convention, simply because we've heard them read that way. We should just say "blessed." The greek word is "markarios," and what it means isn't "blessed" as we think of it--surprised by some great surprise or gifted with some special present--what it means is to be privileged. To be privileged.

Jesus is saying that those who are like these people he's talking about are privileged--they have special rights, special advantages, that others don't. They have a status that others don't have.

"Being privileged" is just different enough from "being blessed," that we have to notice it. God blesses us all, surprises us with undeserved favor, and it's a joy and we must be grateful for it. But that's not exactly what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus is saying that there's something about these people--the poor in spirit, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, and on and on, that makes them special, gives them special advantages that others don't have.

And those translations that say "Happy are those," which I hear now and then, are simply bad, by the way.

It's a terrible way to translate these things, because of course, you can't declare emotions on someone, you know? "You're persecuted? Okay: I declare you happy!"

What is Jesus doing here?

We can't get into the context of Matthew much, but really what Jesus is doing here is saying that the people who have the, oh, postures he describes, who find themselves in the situations he describes, will move from one thing to another. They'll go from outsiders, oppressed and without, to insiders with access. They'll move from powerless people to privileged people.

Jesus repeats this over and over as he goes: I'm promising that you'll be moved from powerless to privileged when the Kingdom of Heaven arrives in full, and you can experience it now, too, because of all you've seen me do and heard me say.

So he goes:

Beatitudes: v3

***3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

"Those who are poor in spirit are privileged, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs," Jesus says. And

while we often take “poor in Spirit” to mean, oh, “sad,” take it to mean hopeless or broken, I don’t think that’s what Jesus is saying here, and I’m not alone in this. I think what Jesus is saying is that those who have not had great experiences of God’s active power, who are poor--without--when it comes to seeing the activity of God, the Spirit at work in the world, they don’t need to worry. The Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. And to the crowd that’s followed him, those healed from diseases, those who were hopeless given hope, those who were near death given life again, those who believed God wasn’t for them, in a society that assumed if you were having trouble, you deserved it--having just recently, in Jesus, discovered freedom from some great, binding, trouble, then they’d be like, “Yes!”

They had thought that God’s Spirit wasn’t with them. But they’ve already discovered in this Messiah who has been walking around with them, saving them from all sorts of terror, that it’s just not true. They’ve been brought into that realm where God’s capability, power, and freedom are active all the time. The Kingdom of Heaven has become theirs.

And *of course* their troubles have brought sadness, hopeless, worry--that’s what trouble does. But that’s not, I think, what Jesus is talking about here: He’s talking about this belief that God wasn’t for them, wasn’t on their side because they’d just never experienced the work of the Spirit in their lives. But

now they have, and they are participating in God's Kingdom come. It's a privilege to be invited in.

We could ask, "How can we – with our privilege – reveal the Holy Spirit's saving, healing, miraculous activity in the world? How can we ensure people realize that the door is open for them?" How can we offer a flood of God's Spirit instead of the drought people feel now?

Beatitudes: v4

4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Here's where Jesus talks of sadness and of grief. The world is full of bad things that make us sad, griefs that cause us pain. But Jesus promises that as we engage with him, that our privilege will be to experience comfort. I don't know how this happens in particular, because it happens in all kinds of ways.

And we who have the Spirit, who are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, we have the privilege of seeing all things orchestrated for our good, even those things we grieve and mourn. This crowd around him, who have witnessed and experienced the miracles of the Messiah's providence, they aren't mourning; they're celebrating.

How can we help others understand that mourning will turn to dancing, and grief to celebration when the Kingdom of Heaven fully comes on earth? How can we remember the ways God's Spirit has shifted our mourning into comfort, as we discover we're not alone in the world? And until then, how can we use the privileged positions we have in the world--our power and influence--to provide comfort to people, as Jesus' followers do.

Beatitudes: v5

***5 Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.***

In Isaiah 42, a passage Christians have understood to be ultimately about Jesus since the earliest days of the Church, we read, "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. "He will not cry out or raise His voice, Nor make His voice heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice."

This goes against the way our world works; it goes against what the Church has now-and-then baptized as the best way to be. We live in a society organized around the needs and wants of privileged men, which

has understood masculinity, manliness, to be a virtue made up not of any Christian virtue, but of violence, rashness, boldness, and authoritarianism. But Jesus both embodies, and undoes in this beatitude, any basis for this assumption.

Jesus says, “Those who are gentle and mild are privileged, because they will inherit the earth.” You know who’s privileged in our world? The powerful, the ones armed with cash in a society whose weapons are money, or armed with guns in a world whose currency is violence. But Jesus, the one who wouldn’t extinguish a barely-burning lamp, says that it’s those on the bottom, who have no great strength to do as they please and no great power to lord over others who will be granted rights over power and privilege when the world comes into its own inheritance, Jesus’ return and the Kingdom at hand.

Lectionary Witnesses:

The other passages that were read to us today fit hand-in-glove with this beatitude’s truth.

We’re to be those, as Psalm 15 puts it, whose “walk is blameless,” who “do what is righteous,” who “speak truth from our hearts,” “utter no slander or slur,” who “do our neighbors no wrong,” who don’t praise “vile people,” and “keep oaths even when it hurts,” without changing our minds. Who “lend money to the poor without interest, and don’t accept a bribe against the

innocent,” which is, simply, to use our privilege for those without it, rather than for ourselves.

When Micah is reminding God’s People of all God has done, God tells them all their religious pomp and circumstance don’t please God, what pleases God is doing for others what God has done for them:

***He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.***

How can our churches, these, oh, outposts of the Kingdom of Heaven, be places where those without strength and privilege in our violent, biggest-dog-wins world, become places where the meek--the gentle and mild--are privileged? How can we, as we go out into the world as ambassadors of this Kingdom in which we are citizens, bear witness to this promise?

And it’s easy, too: Find those without a voice, and listen to them. Speak for them. Take advice from them. Use your privilege for them. What we can’t do is boast that we have received what we’ve deserved; that our faith in God has somehow given us the power, wisdom, influence, or wealth we have. Paul, who experienced more “trouble” than any of us on account of his trust in God, reminds the Corinthians of this. He writes to a group born in a society of inherited wealth

and power,

26 Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”[d]

To follow Jesus is to take on his upside-down way of living in the world, and realize not only our need to side with the lowly, the mild, the gentle, but to see, with eyes wide-open, that from the point of view of those who the world has privileged, we're dummies to do it. And we would be, too, except Jesus rose from the dead, inherited the earth, and is passing both on to those who live the way he lived, use their privilege for others just as he used his for all of us.

Beatitudes: v6

Jesus continues, declaring,

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

And this declaration is simply a promise. Those who want what he's promising, those who long for the whole world to live faithfully to the covenant that God made with Israel, which God has re-negotiated and re-established in Christ, they'll get what they want. Matthew points us back to Jesus' role as Israel's Messiah, here. Luke, when he presents these beatitudes, will talk about the providence God will provide for people in Kingdom Come. Matthew wants us to see that if what we want is God to rule all things, Messiah Jesus has inaugurated it, it's in play, and we who follow Jesus now, we have the power--the very Spirit of God alive in us together--to shape the world so that it's in line with Jesus' character.

How can we do this more and more and more?

Beatitudes: v7

***7 Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.***

Those who show mercy, Jesus says to this crowd that's gathered around him, they will be privileged by being

shown mercy, too. We think of Jesus saying, “Forgive us as we have forgiven others.” He says, soon, that our standards will be used against us. To be a citizen in this Kingdom of Heaven, gain all its benefits and privileges, is to be held to an incredibly high standard.

How are we doing at showing mercy? How are we doing at offering to others the same grace, patience, and space to work out life that we have claimed for ourselves? Because we all expect mercy from Christ. We expect to be given more chances, more time, more help, even though we so quickly forget how much we’re given and so quickly assume that we’ve done better than those who need our grace, patience, and mercy. And yet, Jesus, in Matthew, will come back again and again to this idea that his followers must notice the standards they use.

And it is a privilege to benefit from God’s mercy, no matter how often and how consistently we take it for granted.

Too, mercy is not simply a feeling in Matthew, in the Bible: Mercy is action, an expression of the compassion we feel. We can measure the mercy we show by not only our depth of compassion, but the ways such compassion moves us to act in ways that are without self-interest.

Beatitudes: v8

***8 Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.***

We hear Jesus say this and think of innocents, of children, maybe, but that's not what he's talking about at all. When Jesus says "pure in heart," it's a phrase that points back to the ways our intentions and desires are religiously and morally in line with God's own.

The assumption here is that we do want to see God, that we do care about witnessing God's activity in the world. We want the Kingdom of Heaven realized around us, and we, this crowd around Jesus, want to see more and more of the Messiah's miraculous power. And Jesus says that we who line our desires and intentions up with God's own will see more of the Messiah's miraculous power. We will have the privilege of seeing God at work in the world.

You can do things with this, you know? We could ask where we see God at work in our lives, in the lives of those around us? If we really don't, perhaps, maybe it is because our intentions and desires have drifted away from God's own. What this statement isn't is a promise that if you just act Christian enough, you won't have problems, and everything you pray for will come true. That's bogus. But we are all more likely to see what we are looking for, and there's something automatic, I think, that happens when we decide we

want to try, seriously, to let our intentions and purpose in the world line up with Christ's: We see God at work in ways we didn't before. It's no magic trick, it's simply a promise. Jesus' disciples, who keep following him around after this long sermon, they're going to discover this, too. We end up the ones who, as Psalm 15 says, "will never be shaken."

Beatitudes: v9

***9 Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.***

Jesus says that those who make peace will be called the children of God, and it is a privilege to be counted as a member in the family. Think about who's speaking? This child of God, this Jesus, who is making peace between God and people, is inviting us into the same tasks.

There is nothing pragmatic about this promise. It may not seem like a privilege to make peace, and yet, to be an ambassador on behalf of the God who seeks to erase all conflict between Himself and his creation, who seeks to erase all conflict between people, is not an entry-level job. Or, maybe it is an entry-level job, but with CEO pay, I guess.

So, who do we hate? Who do we ignore? Who do we abandon? Who do we think deserves to die? These are

peace's opposites. Consider, who would you rather not interact with? What political party are they in? What denomination?

I think if we aren't making peace, we're allowing division. There is no "inaction" for we who have the privilege of being invited into God's work redeeming the world. Let's notice ourselves, here.

Beatitudes: v10

And Jesus goes on to say something that could be basically autobiographical. As we hear it, it's worth considering our own experiences of what has come on us, "because of Jesus." What have we reaped in our daily lives because of the ways we have sought to embody Christ? And if we can't find much, what do we do with that?

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus knows, as he tells those around him, that he himself will be a persecuted prophet, that he himself, who has more privilege than anyone he's talking to, he'll end up insulted, persecuted, harassed, and slandered. He knows that he himself will experience a "reward in heaven," his own resurrection.

Conclusion:

I'm going to end without concluding questions today. I've asked enough of us as we've walked through here.

The truth is that to have been given the privileges we've been given is to demand of us a particular way of life in the world. One goes with the other. We aren't given power for power's sake, or blessings for ourselves. We can only boast in the Lord, even if it feels like we're silly to do it, silly to trust God at all.

When God first chose Abraham, and promised him all the world would bless themselves by him, that his children would become slang for a blessing, and wherever they go, they'd bring it along, God enacted a habit he hasn't given up.

That privilege Abraham was given was meant to be for everyone else. We who have been brought into Abraham's family tree through our trust in the Messiah's own faithfulness to God, we are God's agents of blessing in the world, now. And insofar as we, though our privilege, invite others to experience

the benefits of our relationship with God, they become blessed blessers like us.

Let's go with privilege and responsibility on our minds, but more than that, let's leave with gratitude. We have been given so much, so many promises, and we lean into them too rarely.

I'm convinced of one thing, though: It's my personal privilege to be counted among you all.