

Sermon for April 11, 2021**Sermon: Upside-Down Blessings****Scriptures: Matthew 5:1-12**

During this Pandemic, without being able to go out, needing to shelter in place gave us lots of time to examine what it is that we value, enjoy, and are grateful for. It revealed things I had been taking for granted, like being able to go to the grocery store and buy whatever I wanted. The sight of all those empty shelves a year ago was jarring. It took all I could muster to not burst into tears in the middle of Meijer's. Gradually, I began to realize that this is the way millions of humans live. They don't have all the choices we have. They have always had to make do with what they can find.

Not being able to go to hear the Symphony made me value that even more. Not being able to hug my family and friends reminded me of the joy of human contact, of meals shared, and laughter around the table.

Television brought images from the outside in, and there was a lot of it that was jarring too. Issues of racism, sexism, climate change, violence, greed and systemic problems were spotlighted as we sat in our living rooms night after night. It was like a 365 day long Lent. We gave up a lot and had lots of time to think. Millions have suffered losses of loved ones, jobs, and even hope. It makes one wonder if this turning point in human

history might be the opportunity we needed to stop and examine our impact and place in God's good creation.

Jesus helps us see that in times of loss we can gain new insight which has the power to reveal God's presence with us, as we journey through difficult times. His teachings reveal to us a way of thinking that is different from what the world has taught us.

In our culture we have been brought up to believe that individualism and consumerism are the answer. We have been told that wealth will come to those who work hard, disregarding the myriad ways that some people have access that others do not and never would, given the systems in place.

What we value and prioritize, what we label as success, is different in God's way for us. So, how do we know if we are following in Jesus' footsteps? Are we truly "good Christians" or are we being led down a different path? That depends upon who we listen to - the world, or Jesus. Lately, some have been asking the question of what it looks like to be a good Christian. The answer is found in Jesus' teachings.

Jesus' way leads us to a place of love and cooperation, empathy and compassion, rather than greed, violence, and power over one another.

We begin this series examining the words of Jesus as related to us by the writer of the book of Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. This teaching starts out with a list of how Jesus defined being blessed. It seems oddly upside down to our ears.

For example, who has ever wanted to be poor in spirit? Or wanted to mourn? Or wanted to be humbled, persecuted and brought low? I daresay none of us, but it happens to all of us. Bad things happen. It's in those moments that we see where our faith is placed and in whom we rest our trust.

Eugene Peterson worded these beatitudes so well in *The Message*. "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you."

I love this version of the Bible for the ways it inspires us to see things in a slightly different light. None of us really knows the true nature of God for it is far beyond our ability to comprehend. God's power is unfathomable. But when we consider God's love and grace, we can catch a glimpse and see that Jesus' resurrection was a gift unparalleled. Easter should never be

diminished to a day of ham and colored eggs. Easter should inform every day ahead, seeing that death is not the end. Death's bonds couldn't hold Jesus and he came back to show his followers where true power lies, that there is far more to life, even when things don't go the way we had hoped. God's way for us is not a way of fear. It is the way of love.

The world would have us craving more, never satisfied with who we are and what we have. Is being meek or humble a blessing? As Petersen put it, "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are – no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought." I've long contended that no one can really own anything. We only borrow it for a time. They are gifts to be enjoyed and shared.

Jesus' signs of blessing all point in a common direction; God. As Petersen put it, "...when you've worked up a good appetite for God." Putting God's will first in our lives is the sign that we are on the right path. The world won't understand it. There will be times of ridicule and judgment, but we know that even then we are blessed, when our hearts are set on serving God rather than wealth or power or anything else.

Back in 1999, when I finally answered God's call to leave teaching and go to seminary, I had to meet with my boss and tell her I was leaving. She asked point blank why I would do that, given that I was just two years away from being fully vested for retirement. She could not fathom why anyone would do that and I could only say I felt called to follow God's will for my life. My spirit could not rest until I had done that, and it was time. That was not an easy thing to try to explain to someone whose values were very different.

Being a follower of Jesus comes with no guarantee of wealth, success, or perpetual happiness. I suspect this was why Jesus gave us these definitions of being blessed. The world cannot understand or relate, but those who love God and seek to follow on the journey God leads us can look back and see the many times where God was present, holding our hand, guiding our next steps, and bringing us through the tough times.

I pray that this church, this body of Christ, continues to seek the common bond of love of God and love of neighbor. Being a good Christian has less to do with where we worship than the fact that we take time to worship wherever we are. That's one thing we've learned this past year. We never did get credit for showing up in a particular building to be seen by

others as “righteous.” “You’re blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right. Then you can see God.” Then you are pure in heart.

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight.” That’ll preach! There’s a whole sermon in what it can look like to be a peacemaker! “You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘carefull,’ you find yourselves cared for.”

The past couple years have not been easy for anyone. We have had cause to be afraid, had reasons to grieve, to long for an end to the pandemic, to long for the end of violence and it’s not over yet. We still need to be careful, and more than anything we need to care as much about others as we care for our own comfort and freedom. Jesus said as much. He even expects us to care for those we consider our enemies.

The last couple of Jesus’ definitions are the most challenging. Not many Christians are bold enough in their commitment to God to risk being criticized, excluded, or persecuted. It happens some places, but not nearly as often as it should. We go along to get along, saying nothing rather than taking a stand.

The world is watching, now that everything can be recorded and live-streamed. Young people are taking a stand and rightly so, but not necessarily for religious reasons. Where are the Christians who have been called to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God? Where are we when it matters?

Are we there yet?

The Lord calls us to action, even when it isn't popular or easy. Heaven applauds, we read, when we serve God boldly and persevere on that narrow way that leads to life. May it be so. Amen.