**Homily for January 29th, 2023 Matthew 5:1-12 “It’s Your Lucky Day!”**

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."

How a homily *begins* is important. It pretty much determines whether interest will be sustained, or nap time will be embraced. It needs to be a preview of coming attractions, but not such a full preview that there’s no point in listening for the whole time. Different preachers use different techniques, of course, but the way Jesus opened *his* most famous sermon is perhaps the most common and effective way of all. What Jesus does in this section that we have come to call the Beatitudes, is to create *conflict* that cries out for resolution. It works like this: Jesus names a group of people normally thought to be unblessed or unlucky, and pronounces them blessed and brimming with luck. What? And he then tells them that this good fortune is because of the presence and availability of abundant life in God's kingdom to everyone, regardless of status, circumstances, or temporal condition.

 To say that this is a departure from the standard religious teaching of his day is to understate by quite a lot. One of the main features of Jewish spiritual practice back then was a thoroughly embedded *dualism*; the Psalms offer some of the finest examples of this kind of thinking. The righteous are blessed and prosper; the wicked will wither and perish, and if you are blessed, somehow you earned it, and if you are cursed, well, somehow, you earned that, too. The meek, the mourning, the persecuted, those whose spiritual hunger and thirst are not slaked, well, those people are that way because…and then the speaker was free to interpose various opinions and judgments. Those first listeners would have expected the same from Jesus, and that is where he grabbed ‘em, offering different, world-shifting, life changing perspective and balance to a distorted theology.

 Beatitude is not a complex word; it is just the Latin word for blessing. And blessing, if we are willing to take our heads out of the clouds and just be kind of real, isn’t that hard to define, either; it can mean lucky, or fortunate, or well off. These are *not* inscrutable sayings, my friends; they are reframed wisdom meant to encourage and engage the listener. For who hasn’t been poor in spirit, in mourning after a loss, meek from time to time? Who hasn’t hungered and thirsted for answers, needed mercy, tried to bring peace? Jesus doesn’t mess around here; he goes right in and gets to work, opening his most timeless sermon by talking about areas of people’s lives that need some polishing and some encouragement. And he offers *blessing;* not cursing, not judgment, not exclusion. Unlike the world, Jesus doesn’t kick you when you are down. And *that* is a lesson his church still needs to keep working on learning.

 They say that familiarity breeds contempt, and usually that is pretty right. I don’t feel that the post-modern church has contempt for the beatitudes, exactly, but they have become so familiar that they have lost much of their zing and power for a modern hearer. They have been quoted, ironically usually, by so many movie characters that their spiritual core has been somewhat eroded in our world. We hear them as pleasant sayings of a bygone day. But we need to hear them afresh, and their value is in the counterbalance they bring to a world not inclined to slow down for those who mourn, not inclined to reward meekness, a world sold almost entirely on the idea that nice guys finish last. In case you were unsure, phrases like ‘nice guys finish last’ and it’s a dog-eat-dog world’ are not spiritual teachings. But they are common, just as dualism was once common, and what the gospel seeks always to do is to challenge the common with the deep. In that way, this sermon still gets our attention, because it is addressed to the human condition, not just to some early potential Christian converts on a hillside long ago.

 I will end our discussion about blessings with a time for reclaiming some. For we are *not* random potential Christians on a hillside two thousand years ago; we are United Methodist followers in Chico, California. We have explored some distinctive United Methodist blessings over the years, and we know how prayer upbuilds, how being present encourages, how gifts keep everything flowing, how voluntary service undergirds, and how witness grows and nourishes the body, *this* body, *our* body of Christ here and now. We have examined them and found these kinds of blessings to be desirable and useful. And so, I invite the members here to stand, if you so desire, and others too, who would claim these truths today. I will ask you about each vow, and if you will include it in your life, please say, we will!

 **Will you support yourself, your church, and this denomination by praying for it, and being willingly included in its prayers as well?**

 **Will you support your spiritual growth, the flourishing of this congregation, and the upbuilding of United Methodism by being present here, as often as you can?**

 **Will you offer gifts of every kind, returning the blessings of God and sharing the riches of your life in their many forms?**

 **Will you bring the message alive through your service here and wherever God’s children need you?**

 **Finally, will you be a witness to Jesus’ life, telling his story through the way you live?**

Our Lord got the attention of the world through his unusual lists of blessings, and we are an unusually blessed people! In the name of Christ, then, we share those blessings here, and everywhere, as God calls and enables each one of us. Amen!