

*Matthew and the Margins*

Shepherd's Grace Church

February 2, 2014

When Jesus saw the [crowds](#), he went up the [mountain](#); and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and [taught](#) them, saying: <sup>3</sup>"Blessed are the poor in [spirit](#), for theirs is the [kingdom of heaven](#).<sup>4</sup>"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the [earth](#).<sup>6</sup>"Blessed are those who [hunger](#) and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup>"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup>"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will [see](#) God. <sup>9</sup>"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called [children](#) of God. <sup>10</sup>"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you [falsely](#) on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your [reward](#) is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5: 1-12) (Also read 1 Cor. 1: 18-31)

Last week we walked through Jesus' first act of public ministry, his calling of disciples. As we did, we explored this act as disciples ourselves and we wondered together what it means to be of one mind. Paul establishes the importance of this strategy for ministry by reminding us that we do not have to have the same opinion with regards to issues in life, but that we must be of the same mind when it comes to our service of Jesus Christ. We must be willing to love one another as we love ourselves. The oneness of our mind comes from considering this command from God! If we regard other's opinions as having the same value as our own, if we are willing to listen to those opinions with respect and genuine care then we can work together to resolve conflict in the world, in our community and most especially in our church. God invites us to be of one mind and that one mind is a mind we have for love of one another!

This week, with that oneness established, Paul moves on in his First Letter to the Corinthians. He has a number of issues to discuss with this church that he has established and the first one he takes up is their need for change! Apparently, change is as much a problem in the 1<sup>st</sup> century as it is in the 21<sup>st</sup>. The Corinthian Church, founded by Paul was struggling with several different worldly issues. They were being influenced by the outside world by struggles with sex, with relationships, with self importance, with the validity of their ministry and with food! Yes, even food was an issue of contention between the members of First Corinthian Church.

We will talk more about their food issues as we get to chapter 11 but for today, I wanted to introduce the topic to aid in understanding what Paul is trying to say about the cross and the foolishness of people. As Paul points out, the cross is a stumbling block to those who know. The Jews know that God has cursed anyone who is hanged on a tree. Jesus therefore cannot be of great importance in the plan of God because of his ignominious and inglorious death. The Greeks cannot understand a God who could be killed so the cross confounds them. Paul is inviting both groups to change, to be open to new possibilities that come from a oneness where new ideas and understandings are possible.

Nowhere is the notion of change more clear than in the dealings the Corinthians have with food. In the First Church of Corinth, the Lord's Supper was a full meal. It consisted of several courses and was completed by sharing bread and wine in remembrance of the new covenant established by Jesus with all His disciples. The people would gather early for the meal. They would line up according to their social and economic rank and those who were genuinely hungry were served last while those who could afford the fullness of a meal were served first.. You and I are thinking as you hear this rift...how foolish! How foolish indeed. By all accounts there was always plenty of food and shortages only occurred because those at the front of the line hoarded and took more than they needed. When they were finished they threw out what they could not use. Those at the end had to scrape and scrap just to get any at all. How foolish. All they had to do was change the order...right?

At this point I have to be brutally honest! I love the fellowship dinners we have here at Shepherd's Grace! I love the selections of food. I love looking at the dishes as the people of the congregation bring them in. I love anticipating the tastes. I love the conversation we have around the table...but there is one thing about our dinners that absolutely terrifies me. I dread that moment right after grace when I am expected to somehow announce who is going first. No matter how I decide, I feel as if those who have to wait somehow feel deprived. I feel as if some believe they might be shortchanged because others took too much. I look at the tables and the copious quantities of food and I know there will be more than enough, but I also know there may not be enough of everything. I know those selected to go first will get exactly what they want and that others who come later will not! I know in that instant the challenge of equitable distribution and I recognize that change is in order...all we have to do is change...right!

Not coincidentally, that point, that place of change is exactly where we meet Matthew...and Jesus this morning. Today we begin to study the *Sermon on the Mount*. For the next several weeks, we will move through chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel and we will look at some of the most frequently quoted passages in all of scripture. As we hear God's word in these passages, we should recognize from where

God is speaking to us and why God chooses to address us in the place and way God does. We remember that last week, Jesus called his disciples. Today, after He has traveled about Galilee, he comes to a hillside by the sea and he sees the crowds. The crowds He sees are the same ones who have been listening to him teach in their synagogues. They are the same ones who have been healed of their illness and disease. They are the same ones who are hungry, cold, naked, imprisoned by Roman oppression that Jesus has encountered throughout the region. The crowds are people on the very fringes of society who have no voice in the system of their oppression or in the way their lives unfold. They have suffered the loss of loved ones, they have suffered prolonged illness of their parents and children. They have struggled with relationships, They have watched others brutalized by their own family members. They have watched the rich get richer as they raped and pillaged and plundered society as a whole. In short, they are us! In short, they are those on the margins who actually have very little control over their lives and who wait, watch and wonder at how God will possibly rectify their situation!

Surprisingly to those of us from the 21<sup>st</sup> century looking back, these people did not recognize the futility of their situation. They did not know they had little choice in the social, political, economic or religious ways their lives were lived out! They did not recognize the totality of their oppression or the disparity between themselves and those ruling elite who lacked for nothing in this world. They did not know because they could not see. They did not know because they could not experience the abundance and opulence available to others who moved through their lives in privilege. They are people living on the very margins of society not because they choose to live there but because they have been forced there without their knowledge! Their resources have been taken from them and they have been pushed away from the center, away from the seats of power without so much as a struggle.

Matthew writes to these people, the people on the margins so they might have their eyes opened to other possibilities. He writes to them so they might be made aware! He writes to them so they might look for, long for, and anticipate a different situation, He writes so the people on the margin can expect the abundance of God's provision in contrast with the reality of the oppression of the evil empire offered by Satan to Jesus in chapter 4. Matthew writes to these people not as a politician running for election. He writes not as a public administrator offering better roads and streets. He writes instead as a person of God inspired and motivated by a message for freedom and hope. He writes the words of Jesus as an alternative and he invites the people of his age to believe there are different possibilities than those presented to them!

This year, as we study and listen to the words of Matthew, we are going to hear them from the margin. We are going to be invited to recognize that the world has more to offer than the systems of humans designed to promote greed and gluttony. We are going to listen carefully to the word of God presented to an alternative community and we are going to recognize that in the world Jesus came to, the world of oppression, a light has dawned. We are going to recognize as we heard last week that to the people who lived in the region of the shadow of death, a new light has shined. That light is going to dawn on us as well and we are going to recognize in the light of Christ, the possibility for a more profound existence, not only for the people of Matthew's congregation but for ourselves as well! We are going to listen from the margins for a message from the Lord, a message that invites a different perspective and offers different possibilities to those who will choose to be of one mind!

Today, we hear God's message through Jesus on the other side of the folly of the cross. We hear the message opposed to the wisdom of humans and we begin to recognize the fullness of God's wisdom and how great it is when contrasted with our own. Today, as Jesus walks up the mountain we wait with the other disciples. As He turns to face us and sits down, we clamor up so that we might hear. Eagerly we anticipate his words and he begins to teach! "Blessed" he says! Nine times he says "Blessed." The people of the 1<sup>st</sup> century would have understood him completely in this term but we must do some work.

A blessing is an offer, made most commonly by one in power, to someone less powerful. It is sometimes an invitation to be happy. It is frequently an invitation to be aware, but it is most commonly an invitation to change! Sondra Matthaai in her book, *"Making Disciples,"* reminds us that from the very first blessings change was understood. If you think about it, I am sure you will recognize she is correct. What do we ask when we say a blessing over our food? If we slow down long enough to really listen to the words instead of being so rushed to get to the good stuff, perhaps we will hear it. Our prayer over food almost always includes a phrase inviting God to transform what we eat into what we need to live our daily lives! We pray for a change of food into energy so that we might be in service to God! When we prepare to leave worship we bow our heads and receive God's blessing that we might be changed into the disciples God desires and that we might serve Him in all we are and all we do! A blessing is an invitation to change. Paul tells that to the Corinthians this morning and he also tells it to us! Our ignorance is changed into God's wisdom through the power of Christ on the cross! We see firsthand that death leads to life because life leads to love!

Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who are meek, blessed are those who seek justice, blessed are those who are merciful, blessed are those who are pure

in heart, blessed are those who are peacemakers, blessed are those who are oppressed for justice sake and blessed are you! Blessed are you...changed are you when you open your eyes to the power of life in God's kingdom and when you reject the ways of the world!

The truth is however, that we use this word blessed or offer blessing so frequently without even thinking about it and its power! I spoke earlier of grace, the prayer we offer around the table. Often we are in such a hurry that we say this prayer without thinking.

Blessusohlordinthesethygiftswhichweareabouttoreceivefromthybountythroughchristourlordamen! We say them without pause or space and often even without taking a breath to consider what we are asking. We are asking God to make a change! Jesus is responding to our request today but we are busy! We are in a hurry! We don't have time to listen to the offering from God because we just need to get to the good stuff!

Several times during a week I will call people on the phone, people who are part of our congregation and others who are Christian brothers and sisters. At the beginning of the conversation, I will ask them how they are and some will say, "I'm Blessed!" At the end of the conversation many will invite me to have a blessed day! Do you ever have these conversations? Do you ever receive blessings from others in this way? I am sure you do! If you are like me, you receive the blessing without paying attention to it and you go on about your day. Like me, you are too busy to give any real thought to what seems like such an ordinary gesture!

Just the other day, I was in line at the grocery store. I listened as several people ahead of me checked out. In each case, the checker said to the person she was conducting business with, "have a blessed day!" In most cases, the person receiving the blessing responded with a casual "Thank You," and went on with their day. One woman caught my attention however. When she was offered the blessing of the checker, she responded, "Thanks, but I have other plans!" She was so caught up in her own plans that she did not even stop to hear what the person was saying. She had other plans, plans that couldn't be changed in order for her to be blessed! She was just too busy! She was just too locked into the world to hear an invitation from someone else to a very different possibility!

Are we too busy today? Are we too eager to get out into the world and get on with our plans for Super Bowl Sunday? Are we too eager to get on with the rest of our plans for the day to hear a word of blessing from the Lord? Nine times Jesus offers "blessings" to us. Nine times Jesus invites us to hear and be changed! In the Bible, if it is repeated, it is often important...nine times! Can you hear it? Will you hear it? Will you allow yourself to be changed?

Blessed are those who are poor in spirit. They will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven! What change are you willing to hear in this blessing? Do you only hear an invitation to increased spiritual discipline? Do you only hear "Pray and everything will be OK?" I believe in the 1<sup>st</sup> century they had prayer warriors who followed Jesus just as we do today. The congregation that followed Jesus up the mountain was probably full of them. Our congregation is full of them as well and we have witnessed the miracles produced by the power of prayer. In a few weeks we are going to learn once again how to pray as Jesus teaches us in the *Sermon on the Mount*. I look forward to sharing that message with you but today I want you to receive another blessing from what Jesus is offering.

The poor in spirit are those who are economically poor, socially poor, structurally poor also! They are sinking in the mire and the muck of a society that continually creates and increases a disparity in wealth. The rich get rich at the expense, not only of the poor but of the functionally poor. The Roman Empire continues to tax the people of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Their burden is so great that even those who make a reasonable income live with an unreasonable return on that income! They have nothing left to show for their labors. It is, however, not only the tax of the government that causes oppression. It is the system itself. The system promotes greed even to the lowest levels. Tax collectors are despised not because they collect what is due the government but because they add on a share for themselves that goes beyond reasonable! Everyone is in the world for what they can get out of the world! The poor in spirit are invited to be changed in the Kingdom of Heaven. They are invited to look beyond themselves and recognize in their own acceptance of the status quo they have perpetuated a problem in society. They have failed to "Love their neighbor as they love themselves."

The poor in spirit have bought in to a system of every person for themselves and have shunned the understanding of God's salvation as a universal offer. They have ignored the words of scripture that invite care for orphans and widows and for those unable to care for themselves. They have put their own desires and needs ahead of the rest and as a result they have been moved to the margins where they can no longer see the possibility of abundance for all. They can only continue to pursue the possibility of their own perceived need! They flounder on the margin because they cannot make it on their own and they have long since forgotten that God does not intend them to make it on their own. God intends them to work together, to be filled with the very breath of God and to recognize that their success comes from their building success for others!

We would like to believe this is only a first century issue. We would like to believe we have received the blessings of God. We profess them in our *Declaration of Independence*, and in our *Constitution*. In order to secure the blessings of God upon ourselves and upon our posterity, we do hereby ordain and

establish this constitution of the United States! Unfortunately, we continue to be the poor in spirit even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We continue to seek our own gain and we play the zero sum game. We believe there is a finite amount of blessing in this world and we want all we can get for ourselves! In the book of Malachi, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter, God tells us from His very mouth that this is not the case. "Put me to the test!" He says. "Do you not believe that I can open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings upon you!"

There is an ever widening disparity of wealth in our nation today. Most of us, nine of ten in fact believe that about 15% of our population is poor, that about 70% of our population is middle class and about 15% are upper class. The reality however is far different. According to statistics from the Internal Revenue Service, the top 1% of income earners in the united states makes as much as the bottom 65%. The top 2% earn as much as 85% of all the income producers in our country. The disparity of income is so vast that the top earners in our country, the C.E.O.'s and owners make over 500 times what the lowest paid employee in their company makes. What is more incriminating in this disparity is that the government spends \$343 per tax payer annually subsidizing failing corporations and their C.E.O.'s while that same government spends only \$17 dollars paying for the needs of the poor, the orphaned and the widowed!

The poor in spirit are those so disillusioned that they cannot see this disparity because of the promise of the American Dream. The Horatio Alger myth that all of us can be the richest person in America has set about to promote an attitude that all of us must achieve that wealth on our own and at the expense of others who we are willing to subjugate and oppress through our greed and gluttony! Today, Jesus offers a different opportunity to those who will receive His blessing. He offers those on the margin an opportunity to share with others. He does not offer a free ride. He does not offer a welfare solution. What he offers is a recognition that there is enough.

When I look at the food in the fellowship hall at our dinners together, I know there will be enough! I know there will be leftovers for many to take home and enjoy but I also know that not everyone will receive a little of the great green jello salad that tastes so good! All will not receive because some will take too much. But what if everyone were aware of the needs of others as we went through the line. What if everyone were willing to take a little less? All could have a taste. All could have the experience. None would be deprived and none would be denied! This is the offer of blessing Jesus makes today. Those who inherit the Kingdom of Heaven inherit the fullness of all of the Kingdom! All are welcome, all are invited!

All know the folly of the cross and the seeming inconsistency of death but all choose death to their old self so that all might experience the incredible love of life offered in resurrection! All are invited to move from the margins of greed and gluttony to the middle where they are surrounded by God's great love in Jesus Christ! Matthew speaks to us today and through out his gospel from the margins so we will choose a different opportunity! Blessed are you! Blessed are you when you are reviled, when you are different, when you are persecuted and when evil comes your way on account of the choices you have made. Rejoice and be glad! Your reward will be great! Your reward has always been great! Your reward was given long ago on the side of another hill when the one who offered His blessing also offered His life! Amen!