

Be Happy: Claiming the Beatitudes

Introduction 1-10-10

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Matthew 5:1-12

⁵When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

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

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

7 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

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

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Last week, as we celebrated the beginning of a new year and the opportunity for a new beginning as people of faith, we heard Jesus' Sermon on the Mount preached right here. My husband, Tim, has been

reciting the Sermon on the Mount from memory in a variety of churches for about 20 years now. And the power of that sermon only increases for me each time I hear it. It is good to hear those important words about God's ways. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount can be found in the Gospel of Matthew. As Matthew tells the story, Jesus is born, he receives gifts from the wise men, then we skip the growing up years and Jesus finds himself coming to John in the wilderness to be baptized followed by a time of temptation in the wilderness. Once he returns from the wilderness, Jesus is ready to call followers and begin his public ministry proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God, teaching and healing along the way.

Here, in chapter 5 of Matthew, Jesus offers his first words to his disciples and others who have gathered to listen. This, as some commentators have called it, is Jesus' inaugural address as God's kingdom, God's rule, is ushered in. If we know anything about inaugural addresses, we know that there are no wasted words. Everything that is said, is said because it is important. It points to some very large and

essential part of the plan or program for how things are under the new leadership. And often, it is said in a way that clearly sets it apart from the previous administration or regime. Jesus begins this inaugural address with what have come to be called The Beatitudes. These blessings Jesus declares tell us what is key in understanding the kingdom of God, and it is quite different that the social and even religious norms of the day. It is not what was expected. In fact, it kind of turns things up-side-down. God's rule is not the same as the Roman empire. And, accordingly, people are blessed in different ways under the new rule that Jesus came to set up.

Over the next several weeks, we will look rather closely at The Beatitudes. There are 8 of them that amount to just 12 verses, but which say volumes about life lived in God's way. The word beatitude comes from the Latin word for blessing that means happy. That's why the sermon series is called, "Be Happy ". This word is not a passive word which is maybe what we think when we hear the word "blessed" as if someone had done something to us. Rather, the way the words are

used here, it is more of a declaration of what is rather than what might be or could be. It is a celebration of something wonderful!

Happiness!

But just what is happiness? According to the cartoon series, Peanuts, "Happiness is a warm puppy." I'll bet that rings true for many among us. The pursuit of happiness is, according to the Declaration of Independence, one of our unalienable rights... you remember, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". But what is happiness?

If you go into a bookstore, you may be bombarded with books to help you find happiness. In 2008, 4,000 books were published on happiness, compared to just 50 books in the year 2000. According to an article in Psychology Today, "the most popular class at Harvard University is about *positive psychology*, and at least 100 other universities offer similar courses. Happiness workshops for the post-collegiate set abound, and each day "life coaches" promising bliss to potential clients hang out their shingles."

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200812/the-pursuit-happiness>) At the

same time the happiness movement has flourished, according to some measures, as a nation we've grown sadder and more anxious. In some ways, that should come as no surprise if you think about it. You don't find happiness by focusing on it or by trying to attain it. It comes as the result of something greater and deeper. Part of why people seem to become more sad and depressed the more they focus on happiness is because happiness has become a commodity and people get confused thinking that if they only did this or had that... if they only smiled more or didn't think of their troubles, they'd be happy.

There have been several studies in recent years about happiness. It seems that once a person's basic needs are met - you know, food on the table, a roof over your head, and decent work, money and possessions do not have a significant effect on determining whether you will be happy. Happiness simply cannot be bought. The concluding paragraph of the article from Psychology Today reads, "**Happiness Is Living Your Values** If you aren't living according to your values, you won't be happy, no matter how much you are achieving."

This takes us back to Jesus' words, "Blessed", or "Happy" are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; they are the ones living their values, the values taught and lived by the one God sent to show us the way; the one who taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Here is where Jesus' words can seem odd, or maybe even a bit shocking or revolutionary. Jesus is, in a way, saying for citizen's of God's realm here on earth, life doesn't come in the pursuit of happiness. That's getting it backwards. Rather happiness comes in the pursuit of God's way, in living and relating and loving in ways that enlarge life and express grace and gratitude. Life doesn't come in the pursuit of happiness, rather, happiness comes from seeking first the kingdom of God. It's a matter of focusing on the right thing, you see. Happiness is not a goal for those who follow God's ways as revealed in

Jesus. Happiness is the result of participating in God's plan to heal and reconcile and comfort and liberate and love and forgive and to be thankful in all things. Happiness comes in joining with sisters and brothers in worship and study and dialog and good work and prayer; in caring for God's children and God's creation; regardless of the consequences. For blessed - happy are those who live on earth as in heaven. Albert Schweitzer once said, "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve." Happy are those who are not full of themselves seeking meaning in empty vessels, but rather, who empty themselves that they may be filled with the passion to serve God and God's kingdom, for they will experience abundant life. Amen.