

Wesley United Methodist Church

February 2, 2014

"Blessed are..."

Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12,

Today is national day of prayer. Okay, not officially. Not sanctioned by any denomination or government decree. But there will still be more prayers hurtled heavenward today than any other given Sunday. Yes, it's Super Bowl Sunday--and there are prayers going up for that favorite team by players, family members, coaches, investment brokers, and, of course, fans, all over the country. Half of the people will have their prayers answered. Half will not. Sorry, coin tosses and football games are not the testing ground for our prayer life. We will have to dig a bit deeper. So, may the better team win. And, Lord, please give us revs that are on our side...

Jesus had just started his ministry and was gaining popularity. Large crowds were gathering. He had just picked his disciples. and in the quiet of the rolling grassy hills of northern Israel by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus delivered a sermon to a multitude. Acres and acres of people, rich and poor, young and old, doubtless a variety of races, those who were business men and those who were failures. In fact, the crowd that Jesus spoke to that day presented people of all walks of life.

Yet, as different as they all were, Jesus understood that they were all on the same quest. They were all after the same thing. They all wanted happiness. Well, we are just like them, aren't we? Isn't that what we want for ourselves. Isn't that what we ultimately want for our children: Happiness.

The problem is that we really don't grasp the true nature of happiness, and because of that it so often seems to elude us. We think that happiness deals with our outer circumstances. We think that the truly happy person is one who has achieved outer success.

Our beatitudes read:

Blessed is the man who makes a fortune.

Blessed is he who earns six figures.

Happy is the man who has a palace in the city and a summer home in the mountains.

Blessed is he who has won the applause of his peers.

Blessed is the woman who is recognized as a darling of society.

But on this day Jesus shared with his disciples and with all of history, that this concept of happiness is a foundation built on sand. Happiness is not at all based on what we have. True happiness is based on who we are. Happiness is not based on the kind of house that we live in; it depends on the kind of people who live in the house. It is not the kind of clothes we wear, but the person wears the clothes.

It is important to understand that Jesus did not give the Beatitudes, a word meaning blessed or happy, to the crowd. The Scripture very clearly states: "And seeing the multitude, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he began to teach them." The Sermon on the Mount has been described as the disciples ordination service. Wonder why he did that. Why didn't he just give the beatitudes to the crowd and let them come to their own conclusions. For this simple reason that we must know Christ as Savior before we know him as teacher. Unless we have a relationship with God, the beatitudes will seem ludicrous. They fly in the face of everything that the world has taught us. The problem so often is that we put the cart before the horse. We study his teachings and hope that they will change us. The fact is that it is Christ who changes us. And, as we are changed, we stick to his teachings. The Sermon on the Mount is the pattern of living for those who have received Jesus Christ as Savior. With this in mind, I would like to focus on two standards of living as told by Jesus.

Jesus began by saying: Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. What does Jesus mean by poor in spirit? Luke states Jesus' words somewhat different than Matthew. He states the beatitude: Blessed are you poor. So, we're presented with a problem. Those who have wealth can say: Jesus is not talking about

money he is talking about spiritual poverty. Those who are poor can say that he was speaking of financial poverty. So, the rich thank God for Matthew and the poor thank God for Luke. Both can say: He blessed me. Then who is correct?

Chances are neither one. For it is exactly this attitude of self-praise and self-justification that robs persons of their need for the Kingdom of God. When one says, I don't need to be poor in things because I'm poor in spirit, and another says I don't need to be poor in spirit because I'm poor in things, both are saying the same thing: I don't need. And we can never receive a Savior unless we first stand in need of a Savior.

The story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector illustrates this. The Story does not say that the Pharisee was rich, since his prayer was: I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or like this tax collector. We might assume that he was not a wealthy man, because extortion was about the only way that one could amass wealth. Nor does it say that the tax collector who prayed that day was poor. If he was like many tax collectors of his day, he very likely was wealthy. At any rate, the point of the story was that regardless of their outer circumstances, the Pharisee expressed an inner need for nothing. The tax collector admitted being a sinner and was in need of God's mercy. Each received what he felt he needed.

It is true that it is easier for a poor man to recognize that he has needs than the rich man. It is neither poverty nor wealth that keeps a man out of the Kingdom of God. It is pride. Jesus is saying that the first step to personal happiness, the first step in coming to God, is to get rid of pride. Pride is the root of all sin. Blessed are the poor in spirit means that we must decrease, so that he might increase.

As much as possible, pride must first be eliminated from the heart. Poverty of spirit must be placed within. When we have done this, we are ready to take the second step into the Kingdom: Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Again, in the eyes of the world, this seems ridiculous. We usually handle those who mourn by avoiding them. Laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and you cry alone. Isn't that how it goes? We handle those who mourn by attempting to get them out of their mourning state to cheer them up. Yet, there is Jesus saying: Blessed are those who mourn. Doesn't this simply tell us that religion is droopy-eyed and sad-faced?

A mourner in this sense, however, is not necessarily one who weeps, but one who shows concern, or who maintains a spiritual sensitivity. Our problem is that we want victory without suffering. We want cheap grace. We want the promised land, but we would much prefer to avoid the wilderness. We want the resurrection, but we would prefer to avoid the cross. We want God's blessing but we want it without his purging and purifying our lives.

The purpose here is not to turn the world into a world of dark gloom, but rather to point out that if we avoid suffering and grief, then we can never be truly sensitive. Some years ago, I lost my mother to cancer and my older brother through suicide. This was the first real close family loss I had ever experienced, and I don't mind saying that it hit me hard. Then a little more than two years ago our youngest daughter Erika died of cancer. It almost destroyed me, but God had other plans. The truth is that because I experienced that sorrow in my life, I can more effectively minister to those who are in sorrow. I know somewhat how people feel when I go to minister to them about the loss of a loved one. Blessed are those who mourn, for they have the potential of being more sensitive, more open to God, more caring individuals.

What about you? What losses have made you more sensitive? Blessed are those who mourn for the children of broken homes. Blessed are those who mourn for our cities and their plight. Blessed are those who mourn for the homeless, the hungry, the lonely, and the friendless. Blessed are those who mourn for those who hardened their hearts to sin. For if we mourn there is still hope for us. It shows that we care about something that is beyond ourselves. In the end it is not the mourners who are to be pitied, but rather those who do not mourn. And then we will comprehend his teaching, "Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted."