

Blessed Are They  
Isaiah 61:1-11  
Matthew 5:1-12

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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Isaiah 61:1-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Matthew 5:1-12

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.

The Scripture passage I read this morning should be familiar. This is the very core of Jesus' teaching. If we wanted to post something, say, at schools and courthouses, to express a Christian faith, this would be it.

All too often, the Beatitudes are cynically taught as things that only apply to some people, the poor and the powerless. They are used to justify a false narrative that says it's all right that for some people to be treated very badly here on Earth, because they will be compensated later.

Have you noticed? Rich people aren't often reminded that, "Blessed are the meek." People in power remind poor and powerless people of that, to keep them "in their place." Poor people are told that, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus' words are twisted to discourage poor people from trying to climb out of poverty. That is not what Jesus was saying at all. He is not talking about compensation after death for a terrible life lived today. He's talking about something better and more important.

He is talking about how to live.

Last week I said that all of us human beings are on a journey called life. That journey takes us through the wilderness from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem. All of us joined the journey in progress, and most of us must choose for ourselves which paths we will walk.

The literal way to translate the word Jesus said meaning, "blessed," is that these people "have found the right road."<sup>1</sup> That means that the first sentence of the first verse of the first

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<sup>1</sup> Earl F. Palmer, "Matthew 5:1-12, Pastoral Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word*, Volume A-4, p. 238.

Psalm, the number one hymn in the Hebrew hymnbook, literally says, “The one who walks, not in the way of the wicked but in the way of the Lord, has found the right road.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the earliest names for the Christian movement, before we even had the word, “Christian,” was “The Way.” These were people trying to follow Jesus, and they did not see Jesus’ teachings as being about future compensation or justifying not helping people who needed it. They saw them as directions for life.

These teachings of Jesus are not, “spiritual,” meaning irrelevant to the real world around us. These teachings of Jesus are not theoretical, or excuses for inaction. These teachings of Jesus are not only for some people. These teachings of Jesus are road directions for all of us, and every bit as practical and down-to-earth as telling someone to take I-670 to get to the airport.

“The poor in spirit have found the right road, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Jesus did not say, “The poor.” He said, “the poor in spirit.” He is not *just* speaking about people who do not have food to eat or a roof over their heads.

He is talking about those people who help others and who do not make a distinction between *Them* and *Us*. He is talking about people who feed the hungry. He is talking about people who work for justice and safety for communities with little money or power.

Some people work for justice and safety out of enlightened self-interest, because, as Doctor King said, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”<sup>3</sup> Others work for justice and safety simply because all of God’s children need these things, and they can catch glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven when they get them. Either way, these people have found the right road.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 1:1

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963.

“Those who mourn have found the right road, for they will be comforted.” Jesus does not say that, if you’re mourning a loss, you should just turn off your grief like a switch. It is neither as simple nor as easy as just saying, “Don’t be sad, be happy!”

Jesus understands that, sometimes, mourning is exactly what we need to be doing. Those who mourn are on the right road, and they *will* be comforted. “There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh.”<sup>4</sup> It’s okay. The time of laughter is coming, but it is not always here yet. It is okay to still need to mourn who and what has been lost.

“The gentle, humble, and considerate have found the right road, for they will inherit the earth.”<sup>5</sup> You’ll notice that I didn’t say, “meek.” “Meek” may be a politically useful translation, but it is a misleading one.<sup>6</sup> The early Christians, who had known Jesus when he walked the earth or known people who had, were gentle, and humble, and they cared deeply about their fellow human beings. People flocked to the early Church, because the people they saw there were so down-to-earth and loving and kind to everyone, even people who quote-unquote “should have been beneath them.”

But meek they were not. They did not knuckle down to earthly authority very well. Men and women alike called out governors and emperors who did evil, and refused to stop speaking the Truth, even when their own lives were on the line.

Today, the Empire is in ruins, but the Church is here because of those witnesses.

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<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:4.

<sup>5</sup> Three different translations of the word *πραεῖς*.

<sup>6</sup> “Meek” goes back at least as far as the King James Bible, which was translated and edited with a deliberate pro-monarchy, pro-authoritarian bias, as directed by the patron of the translation, King James VI/I. That makes it traditional, but does not make it an accurate rendition of the Greek original.

“Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness have found the right road, for they will be filled.” Doctor Seuss said that, “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.”<sup>7</sup> Righteousness and justice and peace do not just happen in the world without people working for them.

Good people must stand up for what is right, and not accept policies that are wrong. We can disagree about the right thing to do in a given situation, but we cannot both follow Jesus and be indifferent about the right thing. “Opting out of politics,” is a cynical expression of rich-people’s privilege, and it abandons the world to those who do not care about right and wrong. If we are silent in the face of injustice, then we have chosen the side of the oppressor. That is a terrible road to choose, for us and for our neighbors and for our children and for our grandchildren.

“The merciful and compassionate have found the right road, for they will receive mercy.” This should be obvious, though it is not absolute. People who are merciful and compassionate create that kind of atmosphere around themselves. If you are a person who is compassionate and quick to forgive, then, when you need forgiveness and compassion, and we all do at one time or another, you will tend to receive it.

“The pure in heart have found the right road, for they will see God.” Not one of us is perfectly pure in and of ourselves, but we have been washed clean in baptism, and we are re-cleansed every time we confess our sins and are forgiven.

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (1971).

“The peacemakers have found the right road, for they will be called children of God.” God wants peace for all human beings. God wants more than peace – God wants *shalom*, God’s peace and abundance and security. Those people who work for that will be called children of God, for so they are. They are the righteous children who, when their Father tells them to go work in the vineyard, go and work in the vineyard.

The thing about God’s *shalom* is that you can’t have it, unless your neighbor does, too. So, the people who work to make that happen, get to experience *shalom* as the children of a loving God.

“Those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake have found the right road, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. You have found the right road when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

Jesus is presenting a very different worldview from the one that we usually hear, isn’t he? There is no room in Jesus’ teaching for, “Greed is good,” or “I’ve got mine, forget you.” Jesus is presenting a worldview of truly loving our neighbors—all our neighbors. Even the ones who don’t love us back. Even loving our enemies.

That idea is subversive of the world’s order and of “the way of the world.” Perhaps it’s even subversive of national security. The people who killed him certainly believed it was.

Christians are not being persecuted in the United States,<sup>8</sup> but, if we start living like Jesus says, the way of the world is going to push back, more and more. One thing I’ve learned from

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<sup>8</sup> Christians are most certainly being persecuted in other nations overseas. To call American right-wing Christians not being able to make everyone else live by their rules “persecution” is an insult to those who face death daily.

many years of playing video games is that if I keep encountering more and more difficult challenges, I'm going the right way.

If we try to live Jesus' way, we will be told that it's not practical. We will be told that it's not sustainable. We will be told that this isn't how the world works, that we will be left alone against the world.

But the Truth is, the creator of the Universe says this *is* how it works, and He says that we will never be alone.<sup>9</sup>

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 28:20, Psalm 23, etc.