February 2, 2014
Matthew 5:1-12
*Why Are We Here?*

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I want to share with you the Beatitudes from Matthew 5 from the Message translation.  It is a paraphrase written by Eugene Peterson.  For me, it makes those verses that seem so familiar, sound fresh again.

Matthew 5:1-12  The Message (MSG)
“When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:  “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.  “You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.  “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.  “You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.  “You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.  “You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.  “You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.  “Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”

I was talking with Trish Major, our incredible Church administrative assistant, about how we are going to be talking about the Sermon on the Mount for the next couple of weeks.  And Trish shared with me a story that she heard from Wil Bailey.  The story goes that while in seminary, Wil and a friend went to his friend’s mother’s house.  The mother said, “What are you studying these days?”  And her son answered, “the Beatitudes.”  And the mother said, “The Beatitudes, I think that they are so pretty.  They make me feel so good.”  The son responded, “Really?  They scare me to death.”

“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 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.”

I have to tell you Jesus was not very good at marketing.  The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ first public address, and while they may be memorable and pretty, the Beatitudes are not easy or fun.  There are no applause lines.  The Beatitudes are well-written, but they really are downers.  It begins well.  Jesus sees the crowds, goes up the mountain, sits down and begins to speak.  He starts out well, “Blessed.”  Fortunate, happy, privileged, lucky.  That’s catchy!  But then he starts using some unappealing adjectives, poor, mourning, meek, hungry, thirsty, reviled, persecuted.  Who wants to be blessed if you end up poor, mourning, meek, hungry, thirsty, reviled or persecuted?

I served as a Chaplain at Children’s Medical Center for a summer and when I think about that experience I think about the pain.  I remember one mother who worked 3 jobs to provide for her family.  One of the caregivers who cared for her child so that she could work these 3 jobs abused the child that was in her care.  As I sat with the mom I asked her what we could pray for.  Her daughter had already failed one brain activity test, and they were going to do one more before she was declared brain-dead.  “What should we pray for?” I asked the mom.  “That my baby is ok,” the mom said.  I knew it wasn’t possible for the daughter to be ok, but I prayed anyway.  “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  In the Message translation it puts that familiar verse this way, “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.”  I pray often that that mother feels the embrace of God.

Let’s look at the first Beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  The vision statement at Greenland Hills comes from this verse. Our vision is “Creating a multi-generational community engaged in advocacy and solidarity with the poor in resources and the poor in spirit.” When one is poor in spirit, one is emptied.  We are free of clutter, available and roomy. When we are “wealthy in spirit,” we are full of ourselves, eager to display how much we know, how much we can do. Or we are filled up with multi-tasking, preoccupied by busyness.  Being poor in spirit bears within it the blessing of life abundant.  The Beatitudes describe the state of joyful response God enables in us when we actively accept God.

Jesus’ teachings in Matthew’s Gospel are about righteousness.  A righteousness that purifies the inward life and energizes us to seek justice for the vulnerable.  There was a report this week from Oxfam that 85 people are as wealthy as half of the world.  The 85 richest people own the same amount as the bottom half of the entire global population.  The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus telling us how to live as people but also as a community of faith in ways that call conventional wisdom into question, subvert the status quo, and intend eventually to re-shape it. Could these 85 people ever be at the end of their rope, could they ever inherit the kingdom of heaven?

Pete Seeger passed away this week.  Pete Seeger over seven decades used his voice to inspire political and social change.  As a veteran of the labor, peace and civil rights movements, he led an Occupy Wall Street protest through Manhattan when he was 91.  I learned a really interesting thing this week about Pete Seeger, Martin Luther King Jr., and the spiritual “We Shall Overcome.”  That song has its roots in the slavery community, and has a complex history. Some say Charles Albert Tindley, the minister at Bainbridge St. Methodist Church in Philadelphia, wrote the words in 1901 to a hymn that he called “I Will Overcome Some Day.”  The song became a favorite at black churches throughout the American south, often sung as “I Will Overcome.”  Striking tobacco workers from South Carolina introduced the song to Zilphia Horton, Cultural Director of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee where Pete Seeger learned it.  Seeger published the song in 1948 and changed the title to “We Shall Overcome” and also added two verses and a banjo part.  Pete Seeger said all he did was change the “will” to “shall” in the title because in his words, “it opens the mouth better.”  Think about singing “will” and “shall”.  Your mouth opens more on “shall,” so there is a better sound.  Pete was a smart man.

When Pete Seeger played his updated version of "We Shall Overcome" to the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., in 1957 at the 25th anniversary of the Highlander Center in Tennessee, he gave King's civil rights movement its anthem. As we continue on discussing the Beatitudes, let's see how "We Shall Overcome" fits as an anthem for the Sermon on the Mount.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is just plain blessing people. All kinds of people. All kinds of down-and-out, extremely vulnerable, and at the bottom of the ladder people.  To proclaim that God regularly shows up in mercy and blessing just where you least expect God to be -- with the poor, with those who are mourning, with the meek and the peacemakers. This is not where citizens of the ancient world look for God and, quite frankly, it's not where citizens of our own world do either. If God shows up here, Jesus is saying, blessing the weak and the vulnerable, then God will be everywhere, showering all creation and its inhabitants with blessing.  So maybe the 85 richest folks qualify, too.

God loves and adores us, God wants the very best for us.  God is a God who delights to create, bless, and redeem, and we are God's own beloved and blessed children.  God’s gives us assurance to accompany us.  To be human is to be broken, and when we meet ourselves in brokenness and vulnerability, we experience the power and presence of God through the Christian community.  When we draw together as the family of God, when we see each other as God’s beloved children, when we meet each other at the points of our brokenness, and convey to each other our and God’s promises of presence, accompaniment and worth, we are worthy of blessing.  For God Almighty has created us, called us, and blessed us.

The Beatitudes show what Jesus was really about.  These are statements of the way the world really works, the way reality looks when seen from God’s perspective. Whatever the world may tell us, however we may believe society functions, Jesus is revealing what’s really going on. It is not those who enjoy abundant wealth or manage to avoid pain that are blessed. It is not the powerful who really call the shots.  It is the Beatitudes that show what the world really looks like, and if we want to know what it means to be “blessed”, we will have to risk letting go and letting God.

Jesus turns everything upside down – or rather, right side up. And if we can find the courage to see the world as Jesus does, we are blessed because God’s presence becomes the reality in which we live.  That is why we are here. And yes, "We Shall Overcome" does work.   I invite you to join me in your hymnal, page 533 as we sing We Shall Overcome together.  “We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome someday!  Oh, deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome someday! 2. We'll walk hand in hand. 3 We shall all be free.  4 We shall live in peace.  5 The Lord will see us through.”