

Worship for Feb. 13, 2022

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship

Happy are those whose way is blameless,

who walk in the way of the Lord.

Happy are those who keep the Lord's decrees,

who seek the Lord with their whole heart.

*Hymn 366 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

Prayer of Confession

Almighty God, you gave the law to guide our lives.

May we never shrink from your commandments,

but, as we are taught by your Son, Jesus,

strive to fulfill the law in perfect love, aware of our occasions of hard-heartedness and sin.

Forgive us and set us free to live in the fullness of your love. Amen.

*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

God is love.

Those who abide in love abide in God

and God abides in them.

Friends, God's word is true and completely reliable.

We are loved, forgiven, and freed. Alleluia! Amen.

Old Testament Reading Psalm 1

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Luke 6:17-26

Morning Message

I told a friend this past week that I was struggling with this text. Every time I read blessed are the poor, the hungry, the hated and hurt, and know the end of the sentence is going to be

something like, “when you die and go to heaven, you won’t suffer these things,” it feels insincere and decidedly, not helpful.

Well, scripture does testify to heaven as a glorious place. The trouble is, there is often a lot of life between then and now. And the now-ness is overwhelming.

Years ago, I had an intractable migraine. It started on a Sunday morning and grew more intense all day, a day that included a trip to a church in mortal combat with itself. I was part of a team of presbytery folks called on to help them resolve their issues, and, hopefully reconcile.

It didn’t work out that way. Our chairman read the lengthy report and immediately we were hit with angry comments that accused us of all sorts of grievous sins, including lying. Hard to take. Visions of heaven? That congregation could only see hell and some believed we were the devil’s agents.

It was a long ride home. My head felt like it was being squeezed in a vise, my vision was blurring, and I felt sick. The good news was I wasn’t driving, but, the bad news was I was riding in a colleague’s brand new van.

I finally made it home, crawled in bed and Ed brought me an ice pack and more meds and left me in the dark room. He checked on me awhile later, and I felt worse. The room seemed to throb with my pulse. I couldn’t talk. The sound of my own voice hurt my head.

Ed was seriously concerned and called my doctor. And, to his relief, the answering service reached him. On a Sunday night. A little bit of heaven was breaking in, though I couldn’t see it yet.

My doctor called and advised us not to go to the ER, but, he had Ed go to the kitchen cupboard where we keep over the counter and prescription meds, to do a sort of inventory. He said if they could get me to go to sleep, my brain and body could rest and maybe the pain would lessen. So, together, they put together a cocktail of sorts that would hopefully accomplish that.

It worked. I did sleep, but, I had a migraine hangover for the next two days. Kind of like the flu. But, the experience led to some changes in managing my health which have prevented further attacks that intense. And, believe me, it’s a blessing.

Why am I telling you this story? I talk too much already about my own life.

As I've said, every time the Beatitudes come up in the lectionary, I read blessed are the poor, the hungry, the hurting and I remember that intractable pain. There was no blessing in it. I truly thought it would be better to die.

And for so many, near and far away, life is just that hard. Every day. Unrelenting misery. No evidence of blessing.

But, there it is in scripture. Jesus said to the suffering, "You are blessed, even though you suffer. Your reward is great in heaven."

The language of the Beatitudes is beautiful, but they aren't a lovely Christian poem about the virtuous life or something we could do in counted cross stitch to hang on the wall. No. The Beatitudes, as delivered by Jesus, were words of hope for a world in transition. In his day, they were radical.

The audience to whom Jesus spoke was living in a land occupied by Roman oppressors. Those in power were elite imperialists who had no use or care for the common folk. The people who followed Jesus were drawn to him because they were hungry for a new way to live, and for a realm of justice and relief from oppression. The Beatitudes offered hope and comfort in an age when there was little of either.

What Jesus is doing is describing a vision of how this world can be if God is at its heart. And, if God is at the heart of our world, then God is in the hearts of God's people, and that's you and me.

Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, says, "I think Jesus should have asked the crowd to stand on their heads when he taught them the Beatitudes, because that is what he was doing. He was turning the known world upside down, so that those who had been fighting for breath at the bottom of the human heap suddenly found themselves closest to heaven, while those who thought they were on top of things found themselves flat on their backs looking up."

In 1964, the artist, Sister Mary Corita was asked to submit a piece of art to the New York World's Fair. The piece she created was filled with vibrant color. With it came this statement: "On a mountain, Christ said these words, the Beatitudes. Ever since then men have said these words to each other each time with different gestures. Said yes, this is how it should be. This is the way to be happy."

And then she used the bold colors of yellow, and orange, and cobalt, and magenta, and added the words of the world's peacemakers: Anne Frank, Dag Hammarskjold, Albert Einstein, and John F. Kennedy among others.

How can we make our part of the world look more like the vision Jesus described? And, does it mean we have to show up with our paintboxes, our toolboxes?

I think it does. The work we started at that conflicted church was not over the day we delivered our report. No. What we uncovered had to be dealt with, corrected. And they couldn't do it without help. The congregation had to re-imagine the vision of God's kingdom in that place. And when so much has happened, when trust is broken, and friendships destroyed, that vision is illusive.

In Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible, he offers this interpretation of Luke 6:
"You're blessed when you've lost it all. God's kingdom is there for the finding.
You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry. Then you're ready for the Messianic Meal.
You're blessed when the tears flow freely. For joy comes in the morning."

Years after that episode, I can see it more clearly. We had turned that church's beliefs about themselves upside down. It was very hard to hear and they rejected it. Not only did they reject it, they rejected the people sent to help and pretty much chased us out. So, instead of being mad at each other, they were now mad at us. It would have been fine with me to just shake the dust off our sandals and never return. But, that's not ok if you're trying to do things Jesus' way.

Our friend Barbara Brown Taylor gets the last word this morning with these thoughts:
"Upside down, you begin to see God's blessed ones in places it would never have occurred to you to look. You begin to see that the poor in spirit, the meek and those who mourn are not people you can help, but people who can help you, if you will let them, and that their hunger and thirst for God are not voids to be filled but appetites to be envied.

Upside down, you begin to see that the peacemakers are not flower children but physicians, prescribing God's own tranquility...Upside down, you begin to see that those who have been bruised for their faith are not the sad ones but the happy ones because they have found something worth being bruised for, and that those who are merciful are just handing out what they have already received in abundance.

The world looks funny upside down, but maybe that is just how it looks when you have got your feet planted in heaven."

So, friends, blessed are we...the one who writes the sermons and those who tolerate them. To God be the glory. Amen.

*Affirmation of Faith Apostles' Creed p. 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

*Hymn 606 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

*Hymn 692 Spirit, Open My Heart

*Blessing

Go now, with your trust in the Lord.

Do not be influenced by the ways of cynics and scoffers,
but delight in the Lord's company, day and night.

And may God raise you to new life with Christ.

May Christ Jesus heal you of all that troubles you.

And may the Holy Spirit nourish you from the deep well
and keep you faithful and fruitful in all you do. Amen.

*Postlude