

**Wesley United Methodist Church**  
**January 29, 2017**  
**Text: Micah 6:1-8**  
**Matthew 5:1-12**  
**Title: Who Are You? Embody Beatitude Living**

We have just heard the beginning of the section of Matthew's Gospel known as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. For the next three weeks, we will be reflecting upon sections of this collection of Jesus' teachings and how they help to tell us who we are and how God expects us to live. The section today is generally called the Beatitudes. We heard it read, and then we sang it.

When you hear it, do you get excited and think it is wonderful, or do you find yourself with many questions? I wouldn't be surprised at either reaction, and I guess, I would say that my response is typically some of both. They seem upside-down or counter-intuitive and yet... they are truths about living in God's kingdom.

They sound idealistic and quite often contradictory to the way we or others have experienced life. Some of us might quickly agree that those who mourn do find comfort, but you probably know some people who have never found comfort and for whom life is filled with grief and mourning. The meek generally don't inherit the earth as we know it and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness or justice often take that yearning with them to their graves.

One of the commentaries I read noted, "Whenever we hear the Beatitudes, we are struck with their poetic beauty and, at the same time, overwhelmed by their perceived impracticality for the world in which we live. We admire the instruction, but we fear the implications of putting the words into actual practice. We live in a time when the blessings given are to those who succeed, often at the expense of others."<sup>i</sup>

Part of our difficulty with the Beatitudes may be that we often hear them as an imperative or prescription of how we should live and what will happen if we live that way. We know about prescriptive living. Study hard and you will pass your test. Eat well and you will lose weight and be healthier. Exercise and you will feel better. Work hard and your boss will respect you. Unfortunately, prescriptive living doesn't always work.

However, the Beatitudes are not an imperative; they don't tell us what to do, but rather they are indicative, they are descriptions or promises of something much bigger than our daily lives. They are not statements about how we must live IF we want God to love us. Rather, they are statements about how we live BECAUSE God is already in relationship with us.

Because God is already in relationship with us, we are being molded into this by walking with God and having our lives changed. Being comforted, for example, is a gift from God, but it is one we are not likely to receive unless we are open to it, unless we have at some point, reached the point where we cannot help ourselves and know that we need help from others – and from God.

I remember an evening many years ago, when I was feeling really down. I was going to a gathering where I knew that there would be people I really liked. There would be a lot of hugging, friendship, and good worship. I needed that so much. As I was driving there, I thought about being a sponge and soaking up all the love and support that I needed. Part way through the night, I realized that I was feeling more lonely and more sad than I had earlier. As I sat in the sanctuary that night praying about it and wanting to leave, I suddenly had a vision of that sponge I had identified myself with – the sponge that I wanted to be to soak up love and companionship. The problem was that I had not taken the sponge out of its

packaging. The sponge was still in the plastic wrapping. Sponges cannot soak up anything when they are carefully wrapped in plastic. That was what I was doing that night. I wanted to feel the love and support but I was protecting myself so much that I wouldn't allow myself to be open to that love or support from anyone – including God.

Fortunately, I believe God gave me that image of the sponge still wrapped in cellophane and that made a difference. I began to reach out to connect with others and, as usually happens, they also reached out to me. My quick and less than honest answer that everything was fine, changed and people could respond to my need for support and my sponge, removed from its cellophane began to absorb what I had gone there looking to find. I have tried since then to be aware of the times when I may try to wrap myself in the cellophane and thereby deny myself the opportunity to experience what God wants all of us to experience.

We can best experience comfort from others and from God when we are honest enough to acknowledge that we need it. Once we have experienced that love and comfort, we are more likely to be willing to be open and to reach out for it again.

Generally, one of the best places to find that comfort and blessing is in the middle of the Christian community. It is here, that we share our hurts, our joys, our concerns. It is here, that we reach out to others and check up on each other, and let each other know that we care.

It is not unusual for me to find myself in the situation where someone has told me that they are going to have surgery or that they have health issues or have lost their job or ..... you name it. That means that I can reach out; that I can respond but more often than I care to admit, what follows is: Don't tell anyone. I do understand that there are things that we

want to keep private and obviously, I will respect that. I have been in too many congregations where too many details are shared during prayer time that may not be what people want to have as common knowledge.

Fortunately, we don't need to know all the details for us to hold someone in prayer or to reach out to someone who is hurting.

However, sometimes what I hear is "I don't want to bother anyone." I feel a little sad when I hear that because I fear that the person is cutting him or herself off from the support and love of the community.

I generally try to reassure people that it is not a bother to let someone know that we need some extra prayer; that something is happening in our life. You have probably heard me say during prayer time that when we share our concerns they are often made easier to bear and when we share our joys they are multiplied. It is within a community of faith that those who mourn are comforted. It is within a community of faith that we find support for the daily struggles of life.

The Beatitudes are addressed more to a congregation than to an individual. They describe what it is to live in a community that focuses on God, that lives in God's grace and extends God's love to others. They remind us that we are not to sit back passively and experience God's grace but that we are to extend that grace and love to others.

Living into the Beatitudes means taking them together as a collection. They are connected and collectively they allow us to be in the world, while not being totally shaped by it. When we live into and embody the Beatitudes we are offering an alternative to what the world seems to be pursuing.

I think that Beatitude living involves both compassion and hopefulness.

Compassion is really not the same thing as pity or sympathy. Compassion grows as we realize that we share our humanity with everyone else. Compassion cuts through all barriers that we might erect. While each of us is a unique individual, with different gifts and abilities, we are all created by God and so we belong to each other. What affects one of us affects all of us in some way. Living into the Beatitudes involves deep compassion.

Most of us can agree that there is a lot of hopelessness in our world. Jurgen Moltmann, a great theologian believed that the death knell of the church is when the overall attitude moves from anger to cynicism. Cynicism differs from anger. When I read news reports or Facebook posts I see a lot of anger and frustration. Anger can be a powerful tool when used properly. Cynicism has gone a dangerous step further. Cynicism has decided to accept whatever is, regardless of the consequences. Cynicism offers little hope that things will get better and lives with the attitude that, "It's just the way things are. You will get used to it." <sup>ii</sup>

When we become cynical, we lose hope. The Beatitudes invite us to the opposite point of view, which is hopefulness. This is not a Pollyanna, unrealistic optimism that refuses to see any problems. Hopefulness is not a denial of reality. Hopefulness does not deny it is raining but rather hopes that the rain will stop at some point. Hopefulness does not deny that tough things are happening, but believes that there is a way through. Hopefulness, and Christianity remind us that we place our hope in Christ who consistently offered hope to the hopeless. We stand in a world where we are sure of the possibility that love, mercy, humility, peace, faith in Christ are descriptors of what it means to really live. Our lives are fuller when we embody Beatitude living.

When we embody Beatitude living; when we know that our focus, our grounding is Jesus then we do not allow the world or others to tell us who we are. Personally, I believe that this is becoming increasingly important as we find ourselves in the middle of debates about what the values of our country are. It becomes increasingly important for us to be clear about who we are as Children of God.

What difference would it make for us as a congregation if we embody Beatitude living? It would mean that we would follow up on our prayer time by continuing to pray for those whose names are mentioned in our worship. I am sure that some of us already do this, and I would encourage the rest of us to begin to make this part of our daily practice. It might mean that we are more intentional about sending a card or contacting someone who needs to hear about God's love.

It would mean that we would embody a love for justice and kindness in our everyday lives.

Beatitude living means that our speech is gentle; that we use words that build others up rather than destroying them or knocking them down.

Beatitude living means that our actions are ones that bring peace. We bring peace into our relationships, peace into our meetings, peace into our lives and the lives of others. You remember the song, "Let there be peace of earth." Some of its key message is "let it begin with me." "With every step I take, let this be my solemn vow: to take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

This is true of most every change or attitude we would like to see. It begins with us. When we embody Beatitude living, we live in the way we hope that the world will live if we are living in God's way.

Embodying Beatitude living means that our works are ones that lift up the lowly. We lift up those who are feeling beaten down wherever we may find them.

Micah tells us that God does not want rituals and empty religious symbols. What God wants from us is to “do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with (our) God.” This is Beatitude living and it is life that is fulfilling.

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<sup>i</sup> Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 1, Pastoral Perspective

<sup>ii</sup> Feasting on the Word, See above.