

4th Sunday after Epiphany, Year A – February 6, 2011
Based on Matthew 5:1-12 - written by Pastor Paul Horn, Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

**The State of the Church Address:
“This is who you are... and what you will be.”**

My fellow citizens of God’s kingdom... I have just come from the palace of the King, with good news for his people!

Two weeks ago President Barak Obama delivered the State of the Union Address. Every year the President of the United States briefs the country on where we have been, what kind of shape we are in now, where we will be going, and how we will get there. I got to thinking, “We could have a State of the Church Address.” What is the state of the church? Where have God’s people been? What kind of shape are we in now? Where are we headed? Our Commander in Chief, the King of kings, briefs us on the State of the Church in Matthew chapter 5. Most Christians know this section as the Sermon on the Mount. The first 12 verses that we will look at this morning focus on what we commonly refer to as the Beatitudes (or Blessings). Through these blessings Jesus tells you who you are and what you will be. These are not a politician’s empty promises, but your King’s sure and certain promises for the citizens of his kingdom.

To fully understand the Beatitudes, you have to know a little about the audience whom Jesus is teaching. Matthew tells us that the crowds of people came to Jesus, as did his disciples. Jesus gathers his disciples around him and teaches them. This is important to understand, that these blessings were spoken to believers. These blessings were not intended to be some formula for attaining God’s favor and blessing by pious living. These blessings were spoken to believers to teach them, “This is who you are and what you will be,” in other words, the State of the Church.

Blessed are you... What does that mean? The word *blessed* is not used in the Bible to express purely external happiness. There is a popular country song entitled, “I’m a lucky man.” The singer croons about the riches, pleasures and successes in his life. Blessedness is not attached to the fleeting happiness that this world offers. Blessedness is always connected to God’s grace toward me. Blessedness is the contentment of the believer who has experienced the grace of God and salvation, regardless of whatever outward condition he may find himself in. Blessed is always the result of God’s grace toward me. And this is the State of the Church: you are blessed.

Blessed are the poor in spirit...

Jesus once told a story about a about two men – one wore a tailored suit with pressed shirt and silk tie, he stood in front of the church doors, and bragged that there is very likely a special throne in heaven with his name on it because he had spent the last forty-six minutes praying for more money so he could be generous and boasting that twice last week he ate only half a grapefruit for breakfast instead of eggs, potatoes and toast. The other also wore a suit, but his pants had holes from kneeling to beg God for forgiveness. His shirt was stained with tears from thinking about the cheating, lying, and stinging comments he had made. This second man describes the state of the church. You and are the poor in spirit. We have hearts that recognize, on our own, we are spiritually bankrupt. Our hearts cry out, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling.” Like beggars, we stoop before our God, with nothing to boast or brag of, no righteousness of our own. Yet we are blessed. We are poor in spirit, but living everyday in the luxury of our Father’s love, whose Son’s righteousness makes us rich.

Blessed are those who mourn...

Jesus had a good friend who died. And our Lord, the almighty and all-knowing God, wasn’t at the bedside to hold his friend’s hand when the clouds of death closed his eyes. He even arrived late for the funeral, four days late. And when he finally stood at the grave he broke down and wept. Although he knew that his life, death and resurrection would undo the sobering consequences of sin, he still grieved. No doubt many of you have stood at a graveside and wept. I know that all of us will one day stand at a grave with tear-stained cheeks. But Jesus says, “Blessed are you who mourn,

for you will be comforted.” Jesus tells you the future state of the church; you will be comforted. He soothes the troubled soul, with these words which he spoke to his dead friend’s grieving sister, “I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” (Luke 11) You are blessed, for through faith, Christ is your resurrection. He is your comfort.

Blessed are the meek...

Jesus told a story about a man who was going to build big warehouses for all of the stuff he had accumulated. Candy-apple Chevy Camero’s, ear-shattering sound systems, eye-popping plasma screen TVs, spotless crystal stemware, the finest collection of his football team’s memorabilia. The night before the groundbreaking ceremony to begin construction he fell over dead. The apostle Paul, on the other hand, didn’t have much and was what we would call meek. Meek doesn’t mean weak. Paul explains, “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:12-13) This is the state of the church: you are meek, humbly content, yet you live as royal priests no matter what is in your bank account.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...

A Samaritan woman was dying of thirst even though she just pulled up a bucket of fresh water from the town well. She knew that if she drained it, she would still be thirsting to get right with God, still hungry for God’s approval. Even though she hadn’t grown up in the church, she had heard somewhere along the line that God in heaven above would send a Savior to quench her thirst and fill her starving soul. Jesus looked her in the eye and said, “I who speak to you am he” (John 4:26).

This is the state of the church: you are those who pine like the Psalmist, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. My body longs for you in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” (Ps 42 & 63) Our souls thirst for God, for his forgiveness, for relief from guilt, for a strong faith, for wisdom. And there is no better meal for hungry hearts than the gospel found in God’s Word and in his Sacraments. Jesus promises, “Whoever drinks the water I give him will never go thirsty.” (John 4.14) You will always thirst for God, because that is how God made you, and you will always be filled when you go and drink from his Word and Sacraments, because it is what he has promised you.

Blessed are the merciful...

A widow was down to her last handful of flour and her last dribble of oil to bake her last loaf of bread for herself and her dear little boy. Though facing starvation, she heard the request of the visiting man of God, “First bake some bread for me.” Then Elijah said, “*This is what the LORD ... says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry.’*” The Bible writer then tells us, “*There was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family*” (1 Kings 17:13-15).

This is who you are, people who love to show mercy on others, because that is how God made you, and that is what you will be, people who love to show mercy. You have experienced the mercy of God, a God who caused his Son to live a perfect life, which we cannot do; a God who had his Son punished in your place; a God whose Son rose from death, which none of us could ever do, and out of his mercy, he gave this all to you through faith. You have experienced God’s mercy. And when we care for others, we will find that we are cared for by God and others, we will be blessed! Because that is the state of the church.

Blessed are the pure in heart...

From the outside King David’s life looked like the American dream. A posh mansion, a growing family, his own personal secret service made of battle-hardened Soldiers, a career military officer himself, with enough service awards and medals to put Audie Murphey to shame, and an accomplished musician and song writer on the side. But on the inside, his life was a mess. His heart was a garbage bag stuffed with the moldy leftovers of lust, the fish-heads of fakery, and the stinky rinds of spiritual rot. It took a slap in the soul from his friend for David to admit, “*Against you, Lord, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight ... Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow*” (Psalm 51:4,7-8). God cleaned him up from the inside out.

On the outside your life might look ok. But on the inside, you may feel that things are a spiritual mess! But this is what you are: pure in heart, because that is what God made the church. Paul tells us, "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word." (Ephesians 5:25-26) And through his body and blood given in this Sacrament (Lord's Supper) he reassures you that he has atoned for your sins; they have been covered over with his righteous life. And Jesus promises that the pure in heart see God everyday, and will one day behold him face-to-face. That is what you are, because that is what God made you.

Blessed are the peacemakers...

Wouldn't it be nice if the Iranians and North Koreans just dismantled their nuclear facilities? And wouldn't it be nice if the folks in Pakistan and Afghanistan and Iraq just set their guns down, and the folks in Cairo would stop making us so nervous? Children and teenagers, wouldn't it be nice if your parents never yelled at you at home? And parents, wouldn't it be nice if your children always respected you? Wouldn't it be nice if there were no gossip and petty arguments at work or in our congregation? Wouldn't it be nice if there were peacemakers? There are. They are you, because that is what Jesus made you. He first had to make peace between you and his Father, a God who was angry over your sins and mine of angry words and hostility and friendlessness. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith (declared not guilty of sins), we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." (Romans 5:1,2) The Prince of Peace has made you peacemakers by bringing peace to you. That is what you are and what you will be, because that is what God made you.

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you...

The apostle Peter had been jailed on more than one occasion, not for running a meth lab, but for sharing the good news of Jesus with other people. He wrote a letter to fellow Christians who were being mocked by co-workers for their commitment to Christ, who had been called "goodie-two-shoes" for not partying like Charlie Sheen and Lindsey Lohan, who had their trust in Jesus trampled on by acquaintances who called them weaklings. But Peter wrote what he learned from Jesus, "*Don't be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering ... but praise God that you bear the name 'Christian'*" (1 Peter 4:12,16).

You are blessed because of who you are, a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, who doesn't follow the ways of this world, but walks in the path of the Savior. Even though we will always be picked on for the rest of our lives because of our faith in Christ, Jesus promises that yours are the gold-lined streets, the River of Life, the gates made of pearl, fruit from the Tree of Life, the angelic choirs, basking in the glory and radiance of God himself. That is who you are, because that is what God has made you.

The State of the Church is up! If I am looking at our congregational stats from 2010... Comparing last year's numbers with 2009, in 2009 our average Sunday morning worship attendance was 73 and in 2010 it jumped to 88. Looking at the regular Sunday morning offerings from our members, there was an increase of \$20,000 from 2009 to 2010 (and they say we're in a recession?). In 2009 we had a net membership of 10 souls and 2010 God blessed us with 25 souls. But the State of the Church is not about these numbers. Because the church is the people, and the state the people are in is determined by who they are in Christ. Jesus says that you are poor, mourning, meek, hungry and persecuted. But Jesus says you are blessed, because you possess the kingdom, yours is peace and mercy, your blessing is the grace of God. I pray that you continue to remind yourself of the state you're in, by listening to the State of the Church address, given by your Lord and Savior, every time he speaks to you through Word and wraps his love around you in his Sacraments. Amen.