**Matthew 5:1-12** January 29, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Epiphany 4

*Matthew 5:1Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, 2and he began to teach them, saying:*

*3“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*4Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*5Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*6Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*7Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

*8Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*9Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.*

*10Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*11Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

Dear Fellow Followers of Christ,

One of the most powerful motivators in the world is approval. Few, if any, of us want to admit this. We like to think that we believe what we believe, say what we feel, and act on our convictions. We like to think that whether people approve or not, we will live out what we believe.

The truth is, we live for approval, we crave it. Young children, need the approval of those closest to them, their parents. As teenagers, it gets dicier. Because no longer do they seek the approval of loving parents, but of peers who can be distinctly unloving. As we get older, we learn to be more self-sufficient in these things. We get a thicker skin and learn to take disapproval, at least some. As adults we seek out and befriend people similar to us partly because of our desire for approval and acceptance. We like people who accept us. That is our text is:

**The Beautiful Beatitudes: [Beauty in the Ear of the Beholder]**

**I. The Beatitudes as Affirmation**

In Matthew 5, Jesus begins his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. We will be hearing parts of this sermon over the next few weeks in our Gospel readings. This sermon begins with eight Beatitudes—each starting with the word “blessed”. Wait, what is a Beatitude? A Beatitude is “a statement of blessing”.

The Beatitudes are the sorts of passages people frame and put on their walls. They are beautiful. However, I have to be honest–and perhaps this does not reflect well on me–but over the years, I have not felt as moved by these as it seems other people are. I think part of why I have been conflicted over the Beatitudes is because people have explained the Beatitudes in a lot of different ways.

Some say that the Beatitudes are a New Testament version of the Ten Commandments. Instead of an angry God thundering out of the thick dark clouds atop Mount Sinai, “Thou shalt not..., thou shalt not…”, some would say that in the Beatitudes brother Jesus uses a carrot instead of a stick. He gives us sugar-coated commandments. But that doesn’t make much sense. Jesus says, ***“Blessed are the merciful.”*** That’s not a command unless Jesus is being passive-aggressive. Unless when he says, ***“Blessed are the merciful,”*** he is really saying, “You’d been be merciful or else you are really going to catch it!” But that’s not how Jesus spoke, ever!

And the Beatitudes are not an instruction book on how to be a Christian. And the Beatitudes are not a list of eight different kinds of Christians, like some sort of personality test. And the Beatitudes are not a list of different gifts that will get us “blessed by God” – if only we are meek and merciful and pure enough.

What the Beatitudes are, is assurance, approval. It is an approval because when a Christian acts like a Christian, the world does not approve. And as we live out our lives for Christ, the world shakes its head in disapproval at us, and we ache for approval. As we work and sacrifice for our God, basically two thoughts haunt us:

First, we worry that we have missed out. Second, we worry that we are not respected, not approved, by the world.

We worry that we have missed out because when you stop chasing the things of this world, you tend to have less of the worldly things than others have. To use the most obvious example, let’s just talk about money. If you say, “I am going to give God 10% of my income.” You are going to find that you have less money play around with. When everyone else has a 7th generation IPhone, you may be stuck with a 5th generation or even a flip-phone. You may not eat out as often as other people. And while certain preachers out there will say, “If you give to God, God will give you more,” they promise more than God himself. He may. He *may* steer you into a better paying job, maybe even a winning lottery ticket, but he does not *promise* to fill your bank account up. And it might work the other way, that you do not get that better paying job because you refuse to work every single Sunday. And so we look at that money that we have given to God’s work and we think, “Life would be a lot easier if we didn’t do that!” And the world chimes in, “You fool!”

The second thing we worry about – and this is one of those things that we talk big about, but we don’t actually live up to. We like to say, “This is what I believe, this is what I do, and it doesn’t matter what other people say or think!” But what other people say and think does matter. When the lunch room gets as quiet as a library the second we walk, we do wonder what people were saying about us. Depending on who you are, you might feel anger or shame, but few are the people who can really say, “It doesn’t matter.” We can take a few insults, but when it is a day-after-day barrage, it affects us. And the world is full of it. Many mock the core ideas of our faith –that we are sinful and that Jesus is our Savior –that God is our Creator and that we are not mere evolutionary chance –that a child in the womb is a living human being, not a blob of tissue –that many of the lifestyles championed in society and by celebrities are offensive to God. And as our culture drifts further from Christianity, the world disapproves the more.

To such, Jesus says, “You are blessed.” Jesus is not a new law-giver, but he is the Encourager. His Beatitudes tell us that God knows! God knows that the attitudes he wants us to have, are not attitudes the world likes. To those crushed by the world’s disapproval God says, “I know. I know. And you are blessed. Blessed not by the world which will one day burn up like a piece of paper next to a match. You are blessed by me.”

Now listen to Jesus speak, not to the crowds—no, Matthew takes pains to note that Jesus here was not speaking to the crowds—but to his disciples:

***Read the text, or better speak from memory.***

Those aren’t commands, are they? If you have one take-away from Jesus’ Beatitudes it is to stand back. Listen to God’s stamp of approval on you, my fellow Christian.

**II. The Beatitudes Briefly Examined**

But we can benefit from a very brief look at each of the Beatitudes. Perhaps here it will help if you follow along with the Bible reading in you bulletin on page 7.

***i)*** ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”*** Jesus is not talking about the financially poor. And the “poor in spirit” are also not people with a poor self-image. The “poor in spirit” realize that before God we have nothing to brag about. It is exemplified in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. You remember how the tax collector prayed. He couldn’t even lift his eyes to heaven, but simply said, *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner”* (Lk 18:13).

This “poorness in spirit” is the first virtue. Unless we approach God poor in spirit, trusting only in Jesus our Substitute for sin, nothing else we do is any good before God. Jesus’ blessing is, ***“Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*** For the one who approaches God poor in spirit, heaven is already their possession.

***ii)*** ***“Blessed are those who mourn”*** is Jesus’ next encouragement. This should not be understood to mean that God wants us to walk around sad all the time. “Mourning” partly refers to the sadness of this life: how we do mourn for our loved ones for days, months and years! We never forget. And we have many other sadnesses in life. But there is also another kind of mourning. We are told that Jesus wept twice in his life. It happened when he saw the tomb of his friend Lazarus, and it happened again when he saw Jerusalem and thought about its coming destruction. Both times Jesus looks and mourns not out of personal sadness (he didn’t mourn in Gethsemane or Calvary), but out of sadness for this world, a world which is not what God created it to be, warped and afflicted by sin. As Jesus mourned, we mourn at the problems of drug addiction and violence. We mourn for those living out their lives in opposition to God, intent on self-destruction. To those who look at the world and mourn in this way, Jesus says, ***“They will be comforted.”*** Their mourning will end forever when they reach heaven.

***iii)*** ***“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.”*** This is perhaps the most quoted Beatitude, but what does it mean? We all know that the squeaky wheel gets the grease, that we need to insist upon our rights, or else we get overlooked and trampled on. To be meek means to be humble, gentle, patient; to not be the squeaky wheel insisting on my rights. The meek in Christ do this, not out of weakness, but out of love for neighbor, realizing that others are more important than themselves. Yet while being meek may mean that people will take advantage of you at times, Jesus assures you, ***“you will inherit the earth.”*** Both now and in eternity God will provide for your needs.

The first three, “poor in spirit, mourn, meek” are three that are especially hard for us to swallow. The world looks down on these attitudes and would constantly insult us Christians for the very same reasons that Christ calls you blessed.

***iv)*** ***“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”*** Christianity is not just about attitude. It is also about deeds. The Christian who hungers and thirsts for righteousness always asks, “What is right in God’s sight?” A follower of Christ cannot be content unless what is right is done. There will be a spiritual hunger and thirst to see that what is right is done for the right reasons. ***“They will be filled.”*** You will be content like after a job well done. You will be filled as when you have enjoyed good food, but not too much food (can you smell the potluck?). Contentment will belong to you when you have hungered and thirsted for righteousness.

***v)*** ***“Blessed are the merciful”*** Merciful people are not nice people. Well, actually they are. But they are more than “nice”. A merciful person treats people better than they deserve. Merciful people forgive. If you have ever been forgiven by another person, you know the power of mercy. We can be merciful because God has first shown mercy to us. (Lk 6:36). Mercy means that we value forgiveness over rights. Mercy ends revenge and grudges. Mercy stops the gossiping and complaining. And when we are merciful and lose some of our rights because we have been merciful, Christ assures us that we ***“will be shown mercy.”*** By our fellow people, maybe, but especially by God who is faithful to his promise to be merciful in Christ Jesus.

***vi)*** ***“Blessed are the pure in heart”*** – you ever meet those sorts of people? We consider the “pure in heart” to be naïve. They always assume the best, they don’t get the double entendre in the filthy jokes, they don’t have hidden or selfish motives. They get made fun of for being hopelessly unaware of what everyone else is doing. The truth of the matter is that we should be ashamed that we are not so innocent and simple as the pure of heart. God would encourage them to continue in their innocent, naïve ways, for he says, ***“The pure in heart, they will see God.”***

***vii)*** Second to last is the one Beatitude that is appreciated in this world: ***“Blessed are the peacemakers.”*** One of the highest and most widely respected honors in this world is the Nobel Peace Prize. And yet when Ilisten to the news and look at comments to blogs, I see that peacemakers are few. How many love to criticize and tear down! How many show obvious joy in catching other people in their inconsistencies!

Sixteen hundred years ago lived a giant of the Christian faith named Augustine. He had been the most heathen of heathens. He Christian mother, humanly speaking, was responsible for his conversion. He held her in the highest of regard, and remembered her as a peacemaker. When she would hear of two people who were at odds with each other, if she heard something good about one of them, she would take that news to the second. If she heard anything good about the second, she would take that news to the first, so that they would only hear good of each other. In the end, they would make peace. That is what a peacemaker does. (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. XXI, p.41) ***“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”***

***vii)*** The last is the Beatitude we did not want to hear. But it is so important that Jesus says it twice. ***“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”***

It is a reminder that this entire list is meant as Jesus’ personal assurance to his people, to Christians only. He knows us, he knows our troubles and triumphs, he knows our sorrows and joys, and God is counting all that we suffer for his name, and he approves.

This is how we know that we are not to go about as sad-faced people in this world, he ends saying, ***“Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.”***

I have an uncle and aunt who were dairy farmers up farther north, where the winters are cold and last almost forever. My aunt’s definition of joy is what it looks like when she opens the barn door in spring. She goes down to the barn lets the cows out of the barn for the first time in a long, long time. Even the oldest of the milk cows, runs out the barn door and kicks up her heels, racing out into the pasture! ***“Rejoice and be glad,”*** says Jesus. What would your picture be for ***“Rejoice and be glad”***? A teenager lucky enough to get a new car? Newlyweds? Your dog when you come home from vacation? A reunion with family? Whatever it is, ***“Rejoice and be glad”*** because Jesus has declared you blessed. Amen.