



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
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Sermon: "Walking Uphill"
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Micah 6:6-8
Matthew 5:1-12

I wonder if Jesus ever got stage fright.
Did his voice ever crack, did his hands ever twitch?
Did his eyes wander when he spoke or did he shift his weight from side to side?
Did he clear his throat over and over again or twist his fingers through his black beard?

Had he obsessively practiced what he wanted to say that day on the Mount while he was fasting those forty days in the wilderness?
Or was he surprised that his world-shifting words suddenly poured out of him in the moment - with the mystery and gentleness of baptism water?
Was he terrified or delighted?
Did his voice carry through the hills or did everyone lean in closer to catch every word?

What we do know is that Jesus was stepping into completely new territory that day. Any of us who have ever spoken before a crowd know that it takes practice. And Jesus didn't have what we would call "quality public speaking experience."
He never had the privilege of being:
an animated captain of the Basketball team,
or playing a cool Danny Zukko in community theater,
or attending a Toastmaster's class each week,
or running for president of the Condo board.

His life had been one of a seasoned introvert. His world - small, his dreams - attainable: learning his father's business, cooking alongside his mom, hearing the stories of the ancestors, praying steadily every day, being mischievous with his cousin John, being disheartened by the many abuses his people faced.

And now, here he was, fresh out of temptation and baptism, standing front and center high on a mountain beside the sea, before a crowd of poor, marginalized strangers and friends, over-worked fishermen and farmers, hungry children and weary parents, people from Judea and Jerusalem and towns beyond the Jordan. They all came to see Jesus and to be seen by Him.

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Some scholars call the Beatitudes Jesus Christ's inaugural address. For it is in this moment that Jesus - in a loud or soft voice - sets the tone for his entire ministry. Like Moses presenting the ten commandments, Jesus offers a radical vision for God's inclusive kingdom of heaven. He presents a controversial, counter-cultural approach to society. His words are preparation for the hard work and troublesome road ahead.

Maybe this is why he wants his closest friends beside him that day - so that he can look them in the eyes, make sure they take in every careful word. And they in turn, can help him have courage to speak God's bold truth to power.

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.", Jesus says.*

Let's narrow in on the word "Blessed" for a moment. It's a word we hear quite often. We express feeling blessed all the time, we bless one another, many of us end our emails with "Blessings" (myself included). But in this particular instance this word "Blessed" is more complex. It is sometimes translated to "happy are those" or "peace to those", but these options seem to fall short. I think Father Greg Boyle puts it best when he describes "blessed" as being "in the right place if..." or we are in "right relationship with God when..."

*5 "We are in the right place if the meek inherit the earth.
6 "We are in right relationship with God when those
who hunger and thirst for righteousness, shall be filled.*

Jesus's opening remarks are not meant to serve as an entrance exam to heaven, or a recipe for success, or a set of steps we need to check off. Jesus isn't even calling upon people to elect to become weak or mournful or hungry. The Beatitudes serve a much more radical, relational purpose: they are promises. Sacred, freeing promises. Promises of a God who recognizes us, needs us, and cherishes us when we are in our most vulnerable states. And promises of a God who longs for us to recognize, need, and cherish Her also.

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On a recent trip to New Orleans, my friends and I took a stroll through various historic houses across this captivating, gritty city. At first glance, New Orleans is this exciting, festive place - a celebration of French - Cajun - African - Spanish - and English culture. A wild Mardi Gras city- where all are welcome as they are. But behind the curtain is a place with a complex, painful history and still uncertain present. Wounds are raw there - you can hear it in the wailing jazz music, and the sharp taste of chicory in the coffee, and see it in the boarded up homes of the eighth ward.

On our self-guided tour, my friends and I came upon a beautiful yellow mansion - now serving as a hotel called "Creole Gardens." I asked the manager sitting outside, "Excuse me, who used to own this house?"

With a smile, he said, "It was actually owned by a Presbyterian minister." My face lit up,

“Well,” I said clearing my throat, “Actually I am a Presbyterian minister.”

“Is that right?”, he said, “Well that guy’s name was Reverend Benjamin Palmer. He was a big racist. In fact, they say his famous Thanksgiving sermon was about how the gospel condones slavery and it inspired the state of Louisiana to break away from the Union.”

“Huh... I’m sorry, did I say I was a Presbyterian minister?”

In that moment, all I wanted to do was be invisible.

How could a fellow minister, a fellow Christian, a brother, find reason to not cherish the marginalized, not be in solidarity with those who are suffering, not speak out against human injustice?

And yet, as much as I wanted to, I couldn’t distance myself fully from him. *Why?* Because we know that time and time again, throughout history and even today, we Christians have fallen short. Too often, we have squandered the Beatitudes, misused our faith, lost touch with what is most difficult, yet most essential.

Why do we forget? What is it in our lives, in our society that makes us lose sight of Christ’s sacred, radical promises for each of us? Christ’s call for us to humble ourselves, to need one another, to long for God? Perhaps because it is so hard to understand those who mourn, unless we too are in mourning. It is hard to feel the aching of hunger and thirst, unless we too are empty-handed. It is hard to imagine what the meek endure, unless we are standing beside them, seeing the world through their eyes.

“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.”*

Friends, Jesus wasn’t being philosophical that day on the mountain.

He was speaking to a crowd of broken, beaten bodies. He was looking into the eyes of victims of violence, into the face of one impoverished, directly at a family in search of a place to call home. Jews and gentiles, men and women, who had been cast away and pushed down, forgotten. He saw them, met them where they were, and spoke to them from a place of vulnerable, divine truth, saying: “I see you...even when no one else does. I see you...and God sees you as *blessed*.”

Since that first day, Christ continued showing us what it means to live with bold compassion - compassion that goes against the grain, that doesn’t fall in line, but risks everything to speak truth to power, to lift up the vulnerable among us, to make ready the kingdom of God.

The late priest, Henri Nouwen puts it this way: “Compassion grows with the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts

through all walls which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end.”ⁱ

Yes, we may be distinct, but we belong to one another. We may not walk the same path, but we can dare to walk in one another’s shoes.

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A few weeks ago, twenty-seven of our youth and adults from Grace Covenant journeyed to Atlanta to take a closer look at issues of race and poverty through the lens of our faith.

While we were there, we worshiped at Ebenezer Baptist Church, the church where Martin Luther King Jr began. Ebenezer is a historically African American congregation, yet the pastor, Rev. Warnok preached about his dream for it to become a multi-racial, multi-ethnic community.

We also worked on a farm cared for by refugees. Some who had to flee their homes at a moment’s notice. I caught sight of one of our youth helping a Nepalese man carry his crops. Even though they couldn’t speak the same language, they managed to communicate well with smiles and gestures.

Of all that we experienced together that weekend, the youth were especially struck by our visit to the Center for Civil and Human Rights. At the Center, there is a lunchroom counter (like the one at Woolworths in downtown Asheville). As many of us know, in the 1960’s young, non-violent black and white activists helped to integrate lunchroom counters across the south. They boldly sat down where only white customers were to be served and endured the harsh physical and verbal abuse that followed – without fighting back.

At the Center in Atlanta, this particular counter is a simulation booth – where one can sit, place headphones on, and hear the sort of abhorrent words that the young activists endured.

“It was hard to even last one minute – they had a lot courage!”, said one of our youth.

“How could people treat each other like this - it’s just not right.”, said another.

Stepping into the shoes of those brave, vulnerable souls, our young people now spoke with wisdom far beyond their years – and Christ’s Beatitudes seemed to sing out even louder:

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

I wonder what it would look like for us to walk uphill together, to stand high on the mountaintop, and look straight into the eyes of those around us.

In a world that pulls us so far away from the blessings of “the Beatitudes,” so far away from each other, what would it be like for us to lift up our voices – loud or soft, young or old –

and speak of God's promises for those most in need? Could we be the sort of counter-cultural peacemakers Christ knows us to be?...

...where we make room for the poor and the hungry,
where we stand beside those who are oppressed and lost,
where we recognize the meek and forgotten as God's *blessed* ones.

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When I read about people being detained in airports this week, it struck home. On a couple of occasions, and for whatever reason, I myself have been held in airport immigration holding rooms. I have been asked if I am carrying drugs and if the United States is really my home.

I was given no information as to how long I would be detained nor was I allowed to even make a phone call. And when I asked to use the bathroom, they said it had to be with the door wide open.

It is in those dark hours when I have gotten a small glimpse of the sort of alienation and loneliness so many people among us live with every day. I have hungered to see Christ's face, to feel the support of sacred community, to hear words of compassion and comfort, and to experience the transformative promises the Beatitudes bring.

Pope Francis teaches: "You cannot be a Christian without living like a Christian," "You cannot be a Christian without practicing the Beatitudes."ⁱⁱ

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High on that mountain, nearly two millennia ago, Jesus inaugurated his ministry. He looked directly at a crowd of people hungry for hope and he spoke to them about a kingdom of God that is embodied in their faces:
the faces of the mournful, the meek, the peacemaker, the laborer, the sick, the lonely, the despised, the persecuted, the prisoner, the lost, the forgotten.
And it was here amongst the pain, where Jesus's bold, counter-cultural ministry was born. And it is here where Christ, our Savior, finds us still.
And where He calls the Church to always be.

Friends, when we have the courage to show compassion to those who are hurting,
When we have the vulnerability to express our own need for God and for one another,
When we have the faith to speak out about Christ's promises for us all,
then we are finally practicing the Beatitudes.
We are finally sitting beside Christ on the Mount.
We are finally living as a people who are *blessed*.

ⁱ Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands*. New York: Ballantine, 1972. p. 86

ⁱⁱ Catholic News Service. "I Can't Defend Christianity by Being Against Other Religions." 13 Oct 2016, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/10/13/pope-francis-you-cant-defend-christianity-by-being-against-refugees-and-other-religions/>