

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

What makes you feel happy? For me, it can be a number of things. Spending time with Don wherever that may be, sitting on the beach and watching the waves crash ashore or relaxing in our sunroom, just being with him makes me feel happy. Going hand-in-hand with this is spending time with family. Working in our yard or completing a project in the house gives me a feeling of accomplishment that leaves me feeling happy. When a sermon comes together and is finished, I feel happy. It's not always the big things in life that make me happy.

This past Christmas, we got our grandsons, Jeremy and Phineas, projects that needed to be put together. Jeremy was given an electric guitar wooden ROBOTIME 3D model. When he finished it, he texted us a picture of the completed model sitting on his desk. Because Phineas likes learning how things work, we got him a STEM remote control robot model kit. When he, with the help of his dad, finished one of the many possible models, they texted us a video of the robot rolling across the floor. I was bursting with happiness when we received those text messages. No, it's not always the big things that make me happy. What makes you happy?

Today's scripture reading is taken from the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It is called the Sermon on the Mount because Jesus shared these lessons on a hillside near Capernaum. It likely took him several days to deliver the entire message. Crowds of people followed Jesus everywhere he went, even here to the hillside of Capernaum. His disciples were with him and he turned to them and began teaching them even before the crowds got close.

The disciples were his closest companions. And, as Jesus was growing in popularity, they easily could have grown proud and possessive of their relationship with him. There was no place in Jesus' mission for them to be guided by these things. The mission they were being called to fulfill could not afford self-centered goals. Jesus was counting on them to help with the ministry of taking the Gospel message to all people.

So, he turns to them to deliver these words, which we know as the Beatitudes. As we listen in on the great Teacher's words to the disciples, we also learn about the temptations and distractions we too will face as we follow Jesus. Along with the disciples listening then, we are warned not to expect fame and fortune because we are Christians, but to know that we will be rewarded, maybe not in this lifetime, but in the next, if we are faithful. Jesus wants us to know

there is true happiness in knowing him and following him. It may not always be as the world understands happiness, but we can be assured of a greater happiness in being a part of God's kingdom.

Depending on which translation of the bible you are reading, each Beatitude may begin with either "blessed" are; or "happy" are. Blessed means happy, actually, it means more than feeling happy. If we read past the word, blessed or happy, we learn that to Jesus, "blessed" means the experience of hope and joy, no matter what may come our way. And to possess this hope and joy, which is the deepest form of happiness, we need to follow Jesus, no matter what it may cost us.

Some people approach the beatitudes, and in fact, the whole sermon on the mount, as commandments, prerequisites or requirements for entrance into God's kingdom. And in some instances, for example the call to be merciful, to be poor in spirit (meaning to be without pride and selfishness) or to be peacemakers, this understanding would seem to make sense. Indeed, these are goals we set as we seek to follow Christ.

However, mourning and persecution are not things we seek, but they are experiences we all will undoubtedly have...but having these experiences alone do not mean we will get into the kingdom. If being pure in heart is a requirement for getting into the kingdom, then all of us are doomed, because none of us is perfect in our thoughts and motivations at all times. It is by the grace of God that we are made right for the kingdom.

It is likely that we are to understand the beatitudes as a collection of both goals and graces, both intended to initiate happiness in its' truest forms. Both as hope that gets us through experiences of mourning, suffering and persecution; and as joy as we achieve our daily goals of following Jesus to be peacemakers, selfless and merciful even as we engage a world living with conflicting values.

I want to circle back to the beginning of today's scripture reading where in verse two we read that Jesus "began to speak and taught them," I want us to go back and focus on these words because they point out that Jesus was the teacher. As the Son of God, he was greater than any teacher. The people in those days often looked to the lessons from Moses, the prophets and the religious leaders for guidance and understanding of God and his word. We know from bible stories that we read that they didn't always get it right.

Today, there are those who would seek to be our teachers, not all of which are called by God to do the teaching. Their values may be quite the opposite of God's. Jesus was given the role as Teacher by God and is the authority on all things that are of God. In fact, even his disciples were not given the authority to teach. They were commanded to go out to heal, cast out demons and preach. It wasn't until he commissioned them after his resurrection, that he gave them the authority to go, and teach.

It is to Jesus whom we ultimately should give our attention as we seek to be faithful to God. He not only spoke the truth, but we know because we are witnesses through the reading of the Word, he also is our example in how to live in faithfulness to God. Yes, we have teachers among us true to Jesus' teachings, and we know them to be so as we see them living and hear them teaching the same values and lessons as Christ did.

Let us not be deceived by those that appeal to our need for happiness with false teachings and worldly temptations. Be in tune with the Great Teacher, Jesus, and you won't be deceived. Instead set your goals along the lines of what Jesus teaches through the beatitudes; and accept the grace we all need from God when we fail, and even if things don't turn out exactly as you

thought they should or how you wanted them to turn out, you will be blessed, you will find happiness within the joy and hope that only God can provide.

Maybe you've heard me say this before, but when there came a fork in the road after my ministry was ended at Fahrney-Keedy, I was determined to find a role as a pastor in Lancaster County where I would be closer to our family. I was convinced that my happiness was hinged on this.

As I look over the beatitudes in the light of what has been revealed to me as I prepared this sermon, I see, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" and I am reminded of how I mourned after each rejection I received when interviewing for placement in that area, often times because congregations were seeking a male pastor, or someone that they could afford. I read, "Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy." And I remember feeling anger towards those who put me in the position of needing to find a new placement, but coming to terms with that anger in order to forgive and move on was necessary.

I look at these two beatitudes in this instance because I have been comforted as I mourned the end of one ministry and the inability to find a placement where my heart wanted to go; and I have received God's mercy, which I needed because of the anger I felt. As a result of receiving God's comfort and mercy, I am blessed. I have found happiness. I know the joy of answering God's call to serve according to his plan; and I live in the hope that I am making a difference for him.

Happy are those who follow Jesus. Rising to the challenges of the goals set before us, even when things don't go our way, and, receiving the grace we need when we fall short. I'll ask you one more time, what makes you happy? Think about it. If you can't figure it out, maybe you're looking the wrong direction or asking too many questions through the lens of the foolishness of this world. Look instead, to Jesus for the answers. Amen.