

“Truly Blessed”

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Matthew 5: 1-12

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Monty Python has ruined the Beatitudes for me. Well maybe not ruined, but I don't think I can ever hear the Beatitudes without thinking of Monty Python's "Life of Brian". The movie has a scene in which the main characters find themselves on the edge of the crowd as Jesus is preaching his Sermon on the Mount. Because of their distance from Jesus—and because there are other conversations going on around them—it is difficult for them to understand what Jesus is saying. This situation leads to interchanges that go something like this:



“What was that?” “I think it was 'Blessed are the cheesemakers.'” “Ahh, what's so special about the cheesemakers?” “Well, obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.”

One can hardly blame those in the crowd for being confused about what Jesus is saying! Frankly, a lot of us are still confused about his words nearly 2000 years later.

In Matthew's gospel there are eight Beatitudes. 'Beatitude' can be translated as 'Blessed are...' or 'Happy are ...'

I think that using "happy" to translate the word 'blessed' is probably a mistake, because happy in English really has a sense of smiley, cheery, -- Jesus is talking about something that drops down deeper than something you see on someone's face to something you see glowing in their hearts.

Even if we are talking about something deeper than a smiley cheery face — even if we use the word ‘blessed’ or satisfied instead of happy — the Beatitudes are still a surprise.

Most of us still attach our sense of fulfillment or satisfaction to what we have or don’t have. I think of how often we get caught in the “*if only’s*”. If only I had better health, if only I had a little more money, if only this relationship was better, if only I had a life partner or children, if only I could get a better job or a better place to live. If only I had more energy...

We tend to think of what we lack and think that if that lack – that hole could be filled, we would be satisfied, fulfilled and happy.

But the Beatitudes seem to say the opposite. They say that in your loss, in times of war or persecution; in your humility... you are blessed and you will be filled.

How can this be true? What does it mean for us? Well I believe it to be true first because Jesus said it, but also because I have experienced and seen what Jesus is talking about. Here is what I think this teaching is all about.

Jesus is highlighting the times when people are closest to God. One day we will be called home and we will be so close to God and so full of love and light that no mountain-top experience on earth could compare. And in that day there will be no suffering or pain or fear.

The kingdom of God is not just in the future in a galaxy far, far away — it is all around us right now. That’s what Jesus was constantly teaching — that the kingdom of God is real and all around us. But so much of life blinds us to the kingdom. *What Jesus was saying is that those beatitude moments are moments when we can feel God’s presence very closely and there is nothing, absolutely nothing that compares to being in the presence of God.* On this side of life for reasons that are hard to understand, those Beatitude moments often come through pain and struggle.

Most ministers will tell you that they prefer funerals to weddings. I would say it depends on the funeral and it depends on the wedding, but on the whole I have felt the depth of God’s love more often working with people in times of grief than I have in planning the perfect wedding. And I know I am blessed to be welcomed into these sacred times.

It is not God's will for us to suffer or to be broken down or persecuted, yet somehow in the times that we are in those dark valleys we are able to see and feel the presence of God at a level that we almost never do in the green pastures of life. I know that has been true in my life. The times when I have felt closest to God have been the times when I have come to God on my knees, weary and weak and hurting ... and there have been a lot of those times in the past year.



During the pandemic I have been blessed to rediscover walking. Some of you may remember that I've done some good walks in the past. In 2009, I walked the Camino in Spain, and 5 years ago – (I can't believe it's been 5 years!) I did a pilgrimage in Nova Scotia. Over the course of five days I walked 120km from Mahonne Bay in Nova Scotia to Halifax.

About 15 of us from all over the country came on this pilgrimage – each coming from different places, with different stories and different reasons for making the walk.

At the end of the first day I discovered that I had met two of the women before. They were from a community that I lived in as a child where my dad had been the United Church minister. I had been asked to preach an anniversary service in that community a year or two before, and they had both been there. In fact one of them, Ruth, was the organist and choir director. We have many friends in common such as John and Janice Fink, and we've kept in close contact since we lived in that community in the 70's. In fact Janice watches our service every week.



While out walking this past week I was reminded of Ruth and her story. She had been interviewed about her pilgrimage and Janice had sent the newspaper article to me. The article told Ruth's story of why she went on the pilgrimage and what it meant to her.

Ruth signed up for the pilgrimage and began the daunting task of training for it. Her reason for walking was because

she had a lot of loss in her life, and she hoped the journey would bring some healing. In 2008 she lost her father. Then shortly after, she lost both of her parents-in-law, and then a number of other close family members. These were all hard. But in 2013 her son died in a sudden and tragic accident and she had been devastated. She said “I needed some healing. I needed to slow down, and reflect on my soul. I wasn’t listening to that quiet voice.” And so she walked.

I remember her tears. It took a couple of days before she opened up and shared her grief with us. The second day was a longer walk and she began doubting she could do this, and wondered if she should be on this pilgrimage at all.

When you walk a pilgrimage you sometimes walk with others and you sometimes walk alone. We always end up at the same place at the end of the day for food and lodging and company and time to reflect on the day’s journey. At one point on the walk on the second day Ruth was alone and feeling down. She said “*I was feeling, everybody’s gone and I’m here all alone. I was talking to God and saying I’m not going to be able to do this*” when her cell phone rang. It was her daughter calling to see how she was. She answered ‘terrible!’ but her daughter encouraged her and she kept going.



On the fourth day we walked close to the ocean and had the opportunity to stop and swim, and when Ruth swam she said that it felt like pure joy to her.

She said it was the first time since the death of her son that she felt real joy again, and that her son Matthew loved to swim. A little later on, along the trail that day there were ‘memory benches’ and one of the benches had a plaque that read: *When you sit on this bench remember those that can no longer enjoy this view with you.* The bench was overlooking the ocean and she just broke down and wept over her loss. That night she shared her grief with the group and also the tremendous blessing of that day. She said she had felt God’s presence again.

The next day was the last day — a long 31km hike into Halifax. Ruth wasn’t sure she could make it, but she did. It felt like such an accomplishment, but



the biggest thing she got out of the trip was feeling God's presence in her life and really knowing deep down that she was not alone on the journey. "That really was important for me, to feel God again in my life."

Is it a blessing to lose someone you love? No, but by the grace of God it can become one. By the grace of God, these times of tremendous pain can open a window to a depth of love and even joy that we might never have had without the loss.

I pray that you will not experience great loss or suffering. But because you are human, the odds are good that you will. It is part of life on this side of death. The pandemic has been a time of loss and hardship for all of us.

But even more, I pray that you will experience the love of God in your times of pain, and that you will know deep down that you are not alone – the depth of joy and love of knowing that is beyond all comparison.

Here is a secret, and the secret of the Beatitudes: when we become a people who are able to sit with our own pain, knowing that we are not in that pain alone, then we can be a people who are able to go out and walk into the pain of the world.

Naturally as humans we want to avoid pain and suffering at all cost — but as Christians we follow Jesus who walked towards a cross in order to bring life.

The world needs people willing to enter into places of hurt and conflict. I pray for peacemakers to rise up in Israel and Palestine and for people willing to go into difficult and uncomfortable situations in the world.

I also pray for our own country and community, that we and others might bring more mercy, more justice, and more healing, by the power and the love of the kingdom of God.

Amen