

Texts: Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

I've had conversations with many of you over the years that have gone something like this: Pastor, I don't consider myself to be a disciple. I haven't given up anything really, in order to follow Jesus. At least not like those disciples who he called in the Bible.

Beginning today and over the next several Sunday's we are going to consider what it does mean to be a disciple of Jesus. Those fishermen we heard about last week -- Peter and Andrew and James and John -- may have been the first disciples, but they were not the last. They were four of the twelve that Jesus named to his inner circle during his life on earth, but they were only the beginning of a long line of disciples that has followed Jesus through the centuries. A long line of disciples that comes down from the past all the way to you who are sitting here today. Right here in this room. You, too have been called to follow Jesus and that means that you are disciples.

What we have heard Jesus say this morning, what are commonly called the "Beatitudes", are the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as Matthew tells it. And it's worth spending a couple of minutes looking at the other gospels, because each of the gospel writers gives us a different account of what Jesus did first.

In Mark, the first thing Jesus does is to cast out a demon. For Mark, Jesus crosses boundaries of all sorts. For Mark, nothing either on earth or in the supernatural realm can separate us from God's regard and care.

In Luke, the first thing Jesus does is to go back to his home congregation and preach a sermon that connects him to the prophecy of Isaiah. Luke's Jesus lets everyone know what his ministry will be and for who -- for those on the bottom of the heap, those on the margins, those who are outcast and unseen.

In John, the first thing Jesus does is to turn water into fine wine at the wedding in Cana. And not just a little water, but 6 huge jars that each holds 20 or 30 gallons. That's a lot of wine. For John, Jesus is the very presence of God's overflowing grace.

Which brings us back to Matthew. According to Matthew, Jesus begins his ministry by climbing up a mountain to address his disciples in what we call the Sermon on the Mount. For Matthew, Jesus is first and foremost a teacher. Which means that those who he addressed in his sermon, his disciples – and that includes you disciples – were his students. Learning is important. To be a disciple means to recognize that Jesus is your teacher. You, too, sit at Jesus feet to listen to what he has to say.

What does he have to say? The Sermon on the Mount begins with Jesus drawing our attention to a whole list of people that he claims to be “blessed.” The Greek word is “makarios”, which is sometimes translated as “blessed” and sometimes as “happy.” Both of those words are problematic, because in our day and age, we tend to use words like “blessed” and “happy” when we feel good about ourselves – when we feel successful or fortunate, when we believe that the events of our lives have come together in a positive way. That's a pop culture definition of “blessed.” We would rather not admit to ever feeling like it's all gone south. We would rather not admit that there are days when it's all you can do to get out of bed and keep the tears at bay.

In the Bible, blessings are not just feel-good words about the good life. Blessings have to do with God's regard for you. Blessings have to do with naming God's honor and power. Blessings are powerful words, and they bring powerful things to bear in your life.

So when Jesus gives us a list of those who are blessed, he is saying that God honors them, that God's face shines upon them, that God regards them with favor.

And just who are these who are “blessed?” Not the ones we expect. Not the successful or the fortunate or the ones whose lives have come together in a positive way. Jesus’ words honor the meek, the merciful, the poor in spirit, the ones who mourn, the ones who yearn to follow God’s right path, the ones who are persecuted. Any one of these beatitudes could be an entire sermon on its own. What we disciples have to learn from Jesus is that these beatitudes, these blessings, are about who it is that God regards and honors and brings into God’s embrace.

God’s regard is for the destitute. God’s regard is for those who have been wronged. God’s regard is for those who have lost it all, those who reject violent forms of power, those who suffer and can’t always manage to put on a happy face.

This past week we received a letter from Lutheran World Relief telling us that the quilts we packed up in November are on their way to Lebanon to be distributed in refugee camps to people who have been displaced by the violence in Syria. I want you to think right now about the quilt that you handled that day, the quilt that you picked up off the back of the pew and took downstairs and put in a box. That quilt that was sewn and tied by hand and that you touched with your hands – that quilt will be placed into the hands of someone who probably has lost everything else that he or she ever owned. I want you to think about how you are now connected to that person, that Syrian refugee. And in the days and weeks to come as our government leaders claim that those people are too scary to be allowed into this country, I want you to think about how that quilt carries God’s regard and honor and blessing halfway around the world. From your hands to theirs.

And there’s even more blessing today. We are about to witness God at work right here in our midst, as we baptize three new sisters in Christ – Raeleigh, Taegan and

Brynnar. God's blessing, God's regard and God's honor is focused on these girls this morning, because Jesus is about to invite each of them into a life of discipleship. There are several generations here with them this morning: their parents Crystal and CJ; grandparents Curt and Teresa, Angela and _____. Great grandma Pauline, great-grandpa Alvin and other ancestors are looking on from heaven. The generations of this family go back to the founding of this congregation, and from there back even further. Back through all the generations of disciples that have passed on the story of Jesus, all the way back to those disciples who gathered around Jesus himself that morning on the mountain. The ones who listened to him preach and saw him heal people and forgive people and bless people. Just as we do today. We are part of an enormous web of blessing and honor that goes all the way around the world and all the way back in time. And all of it will come together in a few minutes in the water of baptism, as these three girls join with us in the body of Christ.

And then something even more amazing is going to happen. We are going to have our annual meeting. We are going to BE the body of Christ. Raeleigh's and Taegan's and Brynnar's baptisms will remind us of the call to discipleship that we share. Together as Jesus' disciples, we are going to imagine what Jesus is calling us to do and to be, and then we are going to take action to respond to that call. We are going to consider a new purpose statement for our congregation, a statement that describes how we are to love and embrace one another, how we are to serve and seek justice for all.

The beatitudes name those who are blessed, regarded and honored in God's kingdom. As we hear Jesus' words this morning, as we gather around him on the mountain, as we learn from our Teacher, we disciples know ourselves to be part of that

blessing, too. We are the blessed and we are those who bring that blessing to others. We are the ones who Jesus asks to risk it all for the sake of the kingdom. That's what it means to be a disciple. Come and be part of this amazing journey!