

Jesus, Joy, and Justice  
Matthew 5:1-12

There is a bestseller called *“Tuesday’s with Morrie”* that describes the weekly conversations between Mitch, a successful young sport’s writer, and Morrie, Mitch’s former professor, dying of Lou Gehrig’s disease. Despite its depressing theme, this is a very cheerful book. At places, it is very real. Toward the end of the book, as his body begins to completely break down, Morrie speaks.

*...well, I think that day is coming. That one bothers me. “Why?” because it is the ultimate sign of dependency. Someone wiping your bottom. But I’m working on it. I’m trying to enjoy the process. “Enjoy it?” Yes, after all, I get to be a baby one more time...*

Our culture is obsessed with happiness. Our constitution guarantees it, and each of us spends a great deal of effort trying to find it. What Morrie discovers in the process of his dying is that happiness has very little to do with “stuff.” Happiness is not a warm puppy. Happiness is not a trip to Macy’s. Happiness is not a Mercedes Benz. What Morrie discovers is that rather than being a thing, happiness is an attitude. Happiness is a way of looking at life where the lenses are permanently tinged with joy.

Joy is a particularly spiritual concept. Joy can't be captured in a glitzy ad or commercial. Instead joy is a deep-seated sense of well-being – a fullness of spirit that overflows even when the world seems empty.

My niece's name is Joy. As a teenager she was not particularly pretty. She was awkward physically and uncomfortable socially. But Joy was always serene, calm, dignified, and trusting – connected to a spirit and a world bigger than herself. Today Joy is a kindergarten teacher in Milwaukee, married to the same man for 35 years – neither famous nor wealthy. But because her attitude matches her name – she is “happy.”

Joy is how Morrie lives even while he is dying. At another point in the book Mitch starts talking about how horrible Morrie's disease is. But the old man disagrees.

*It's horrible to watch my body slowly wilt away. But it's also wonderful because of all the time I get to say good-bye. He smiled, “not everyone is so lucky.” Lucky? Did he really say lucky?*

Well, yes, Morrie uses the word “luck.” But Jesus uses the word “Blessed.” To be happy, to be blessed, is to be able to look at life through lenses permanently tinged with joy, seeing and experiencing God's grace. To see and experience God's favor – this gift is given every day, a gift that is given and not earned. This blessedness which Jesus proclaims cannot be grasped or achieved or created. It does not respond to ambition or pride or self-sufficiency.

Blessedness – the fullness of joy – is a gift of God. And it can only be received with an open and yearning heart. Our Gospel text this morning is both a sumptuous banquet and a warm comfort meal. Unfortunately, it is also very familiar. And so, most of us have stopped hearing the beatitudes in fresh ways. Matthew places the Sermon on the Mount at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus has been baptized, taunted and tested in the wilderness. He has called the disciples, and now, finally, the show is on the road. Jesus has cured enough diseases, healed enough lame beggars, and told enough captivating stories, that the crowds are beginning to check him out. So now that he has caught their attention – caught our attention -it is time for Jesus to tell us who we are.

Unlike Luke, who has Jesus preaching down on the plain in the middle of the crowd, Matthew has Jesus climbing the mountain with the disciples – leaving the general crowd to wonder from afar what he is saying. So, what Matthew is telling us is that the words we hear today are meant for disciples' ears – for the ears of those who believe enough and trust enough to follow Jesus, taking him seriously and being changed by him.

Matthew's Gospel is written for Jewish Christians – and so the editor constructs the book in order to be a parallel to the experience, the traditions and the scriptures of the Hebrew people. The beatitudes, then, are to be seen as the Ten Commandments of the New Testament – the revelation from God on a mountain that describes the qualities and expectations of faithful living.

But unlike those Ten Commandments handed to us by Moses – teachings that tell us what we must do – the blessings handed to us by Jesus tell us who we really are. Today’s Gospel reading is not a should-and-ought text – to do this or else. Be meek. Be poor. Be sad. Be pure. Or else! No...this morning’s text is a celebration text. It assures us of the abundant life that God has already given us. But this abundant life is ours only if we admit that we need it. Only if we admit that we are needy people, people who need God. Only then will we be blessed with the sure and certain knowledge that our needs have already been met.

Probably most of us have trouble identifying with the needy people Jesus describes. Maybe we don’t want to identify with them. After all, who wants to be poor or meek or persecuted? But, my friends, we fail to identify at our own peril. We are just as needy as were those first disciples gathered on the mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

A youth group director recalls the experience her affluent Atlanta youth group had when they traveled to Appalachia. She writes:

*They thought all teenagers received cars for their 16<sup>th</sup> birthdays and went on cruises for their senior class trips...the only thing our teenagers were missing was an experience of poverty, so we drove to Appalachia to give them one.*

Of course, what happened is that the kids had their eyes opened by tar paper shacks, barefoot children, strange food, and people whose grammar would make their English teachers cringe.

During the week, the Atlanta teenagers befriended one of the Appalachian teenagers named Dwayne and included him in all their activities. At the closing worship – with teenage emotions spilling down their cheeks – they prayed heartfelt intercessions for these “poor” people of Appalachia. This absolutely infuriated their new-found friend Dwayne. His response to their condescending words? *“You all called me poor! I never thought of myself that way until you said it. I have all these woods to run around in. I have a grandmama and granddaddy who love me. I got a whole shed full of rabbits I can play with anytime I want. Does that sound poor to you? It don’t sound poor to me. You all should save your prayers for someone who needs them.”*

It seems that Matthew might be right when he suggests that we are poor – poor in spirit. For although we may have money in the bank, we sometimes have a deficit of love, compassion, and tolerance in our hearts. Yes, we are poor. And we are meek – not passive wimps, but victims to a world and culture that tries to control us in ways we find difficult to resist. Of course we are those who mourn – those who grieve all the losses in our life, including the deaths of ones we loved, the end of marriages, the inevitable crumbling of our bodies, dreams deferred, children who grow up and leave us, visions of justice and truth that seem more unreachable every day...yes, we are needy people. But if we are real with God and with ourselves, if we are honest about the bruises and brokenness and incompleteness of our lives, then God will meet our need.

The good news of the gospel is powerful today. The blessings which Jesus speaks about today – blessings of comfort and inheritance and fullness and mercy and vision – these blessings are already ours, right now in the midst of our anxieties and our failures and our yearnings. Jesus says, “blessed are,” not “blessed will be.” That is God’s promise to us, a promise that invites us to echo the words of Abraham Heschel: “Just to be is a blessing; to live is holy.” Such an understanding of blessing can teach us to respond as did the teenage girl who escaped from Dachau concentration camp and found refuge in a cave. Though she died alone, starving and emaciated, she left behind words of blessing scratched onto the wall: “I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. I believe in love, even when I don’t feel it, and I believe in God, even when God is silent.”

My friends, we are a blessed people. We already have the abundance which Jesus promises will be ours. And because we are so filled with blessing, we can graciously, generously and energetically be a blessing to others. Every time we baptize a baby, every time we hug a friend, and every time we offer intercessory prayer, we are giving God’s blessings. Every time we share a home-cooked meal or write a note of thanks or lovingly record the minutes of a meeting, we are sharing the blessings of God. Every time we lift pancakes for lunch or sing our hearts out at worship or sit for an hour and do nothing but listen to someone talk – each and every time, we are acknowledging the needs of those around us. And we are offering the blessing of God.

May it be so for you and me! Amen.