

**The Pure in Heart**  
**Matthew 5:1-12**  
**February 5, 2017 – The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**

I'll start the sermon the way soap operas often start by saying, "In our last episode. . ." In this case, in our last sermon, last week we discussed how, in the fourth chapter of Matthew, Jesus laid the groundwork for his earthly ministry. He announced the kingdom of God; he gathered a community of disciples; and he began teaching the people about God's love and mercy. So today, we come to chapters five through seven, three chapters that are commonly called "The Sermon on the Mount." In these three chapters, Jesus begins to teach what it really means to be a community of God's people, working together to bring forth the kingdom of God, "on earth as it is in heaven." And the Beatitudes are both the beginning and the core of the Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes – nine blessing, nine statements of goodness for the Christian community. The chapter opens with "he went up the mountain." Those of us who have been to the Holy Land have had the blessing of standing on that spot. It's one of my favorite places in all the region. There's a beautiful church and garden atop that mountain today. But even in Jesus time, when it was just a grassy hill, it looked out over the Sea of Galilee and down both coasts to the east and to the west. Off in the distance is the Jordan River Valley. One can stand on that spot and truly feel as if they are looking at all creation, and indeed it is "very good." But there's that statement – "he went up the mountain." Those exact words are used nine times to refer to Moses going up Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, and six time to refer to the nations gathering at Mt. Zion in the Book of Isaiah. Indeed throughout the Hebrew Bible, the mountain is a place for the revelation of God's purposes and for the formation of communities committed to those purposes; and this reference to the mountain would not have been lost on Matthew's first century audience.

And so we come to the Beatitudes. We might struggle with the Beatitudes if we read them as being concerned with human feelings and emotions. The Beatitudes are not so much about emotion as they are about God's favor in certain situations. Remember, Jesus is preaching about the kingdom of God as the rightful alternative to the kingdom of Caesar. Jesus is preaching about how God reverses and transforms current injustices and distress. God's favor rests on the victims of such injustice and distress.

The nine Beatitudes are frequently broken into two groups. The first four concern situations which are already being addressed by God and Christ. Scholars note that these four seem to be linked by the letter "pi" – the Greek equivalent of an English "p". Commentator David Garland paraphrased the first four beatitudes: "Blessed are the *poor* in spirit, the *plaintive*, the *powerless*, and those who *pine* for

righteousness.”<sup>1</sup> The first four beatitudes tell of God’s transformation of the destructive socio-political, economic, and religious aspects of Roman rule.

And by the way, don’t be confused by the phrase “poor in spirit.” Most commentators agree that this is not a statement about people who are spiritually weak. This is a statement about the literal poor. The addition of the “in spirit” intensifies their plight; it does not spiritualize it. It is, in fact, speaking to those who are so poor that they have no hope; their very spirits are broken. (I note that Luke’s version of the Beatitudes simply states, “Blessed are the poor.”)

But today, I want to concentrate on the second group of five beatitudes, because they are for the instruction to the Christian community. Blessed are the merciful. Mercy is not simply a sympathetic emotion. No, mercy is an action, a reaching out in kindness, in love to those in desperate circumstances. Mercy is about providing loving help. Mercy is caring on both the physical and the emotional level.

Blessed are the pure in heart. This is about integrity and authenticity. It’s about leading an external way of life that is in keeping with our internal commitment to God.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Every one hearing the beatitudes was familiar with the *Pax Romana*, the peace of Rome. But the peace of Rome was imposed by the strength of the Roman army, and it was imposed for the benefit of the elite and the expense of the commoner. This beatitude is about a peace and a wholeness for all people, people in a right relationship with each other and with God. And indeed, many commentators believe this is a call to transformative and nonviolent resistance to the *Pax Romana*. This is particularly true in light of the next beatitude.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. They will have God’s approval. They will have their reward.

And the final beatitude is really an extension and elaboration of the one before: Blessed are you when people revile and persecute you on my account.”

The beatitudes: Instructions to the church. Instructions to the community and its members. And so as we, North Olmsted United Methodist Church continues to discern what our future will look like, I ask you to keep the Beatitudes in mind. Let us start with “Blessed are the pure in heart.” Repeatedly, in our church planning session last month, we were coached on integrity and authenticity. We were told not to try and be something we are not. Rather play to our strengths as a loving, caring, and intimate congregation. The same is true on an individual level. I remember, now twelve years ago, that I was taking an interview as a Youth Pastor. One of the people on my interview committee essentially told me that I needed to act like the teenagers to relate to the teenagers. I replied: “I need to respectfully disagree. I’m fifty years old. If I pretend that I’m

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<sup>1</sup> *The Pastor’s Bible Study, Vol. 1* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2004) p.24

twenty, those kids will see right through me; and I'll lose their respect. I can love, and support, and embrace them as the person I am. I don't need to pretend to be something I am not." Of course, "pure in heart" also refers to certain ideals, values, and standards for Christian living. The integrity and authenticity must follow in the path of Christ.

I feel like I could almost stop here; because, if we are truly "pure in heart" everything else will naturally fall into place. If we are pure in heart, how can we not be merciful? And, yes, this church does an amazing job at being merciful. We have a strong outreach program. We realize the joy of serving both as a church and as individuals. I have seen it over and over again. When there has been a need, multiple members of the congregation have stepped up to serve; and that makes it a joy for me to serve this congregation.

Blessed are the peacemakers. You've heard it before: *Shalom* – Peace. Inner peace, wholeness, balance, I might even say purity of heart; and that inner peace leads to outer peace, to righteousness and justice and equity for all God's people. We pray it every Sunday. We pray for peace. May we continue to work for peace; and may we live for peace.

Finally, there are the Beatitudes about persecution. We are truly blessed to live in a country where we can freely practice our religion without fear of persecution. Such is certainly not the case in many countries of the world. But I hope that none of you will ever be afraid to claim the name Christian. I've stated before that, sadly, that name – Christian – has unfavorable connotations in general society. If I tell a stranger in Panera's that I'm a Christian, they will frequently assume that I'm some sort of far right Christian extremist who will immediately attempt to convert them in aggressive and less than pleasant ways. Friends, it's up to you and to me to counter that assumption by the things we say and by the way we live. I've preached entire sermons on it, and maybe it's time to preach another one – it's time for us to reclaim the name Christian.

So, nine beatitudes: four promises of God and five instructions for Christian living. May each of us read these beatitudes, ponder these beatitudes, take these beatitudes to heart, and live these beatitudes to the glory of almighty God.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

We pray that you would lead us and guide us.

May we find in the beatitudes your call to Christian living,  
and may we follow that call, wherever that call may lead.

Amen.

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