

“Blessed are the Cursed”  
Based on Matthew 5: 1-12  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
Longview Presbyterian Church—January 30, 2011

It was the first time I saw Jesus of Nazareth. Everyone was talking about him, how he started by calling some fishermen to follow him. He told them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Whatever that means. And they did. They left everything behind and started going all around the countryside with him. He’d go into the synagogues and teach but unlike any rabbi I’d ever heard of, he wasn’t only teaching to the small group of close followers, he was teaching anyone who would listen. He called it the “good news of the kingdom of heaven.” But, of course, the most remarkable thing they were saying about Jesus was that he’d been healing people all over Galilee. I heard stories of him healing people with just about every kind of disease and affliction I’d ever heard of and then some. My neighbor Mary told me that her cousin John saw this Jesus heal a demoniac. He just ordered the demons to leave the man’s body and they did. The man walked away, just as normal as you or me. Like he’d never even had a demon. Well, I figured I needed to see this for myself. So when Mary told me that Jesus was coming, I dropped everything, hoping to get a glimpse of him. Hoping that maybe I’d even get a chance to see him do some healing.

Everywhere Jesus went, more and more people followed him. I couldn’t tell you how many people were in the crowd by the time he got to town, but I’d guess it was a few hundred. But Jesus didn’t seem to mind. He just took a look at our mountain and went on up. He got to the top and sat down, and started to talk, just like a rabbi. He sat up on that mountain and it was almost as though that mountain was his throne. And the crowd, we were his court and subjects. But then I realized, that it wasn’t so much that he was a king on his throne, he was more like Moses on Mt. Sinai, receiving the word of God and bringing it back to us. Jesus went up that mountain so that we could all see him because his teaching was for all, not just his twelve closest disciples, not for a select few. His teaching was for anyone who would listen.

I have to admit, at first I was a little disappointed that Jesus wasn’t healing and casting out demons. That was what I really wanted to see. But then I started listening to what he had to say, and I realized that maybe it was worth listening to. So I got as close as I could, so I could hear him. The first thing I remember him saying, was a list of blessings. I guess that’s what you could call them. But they were strange because he everything was upside down. I mean, things that we would consider curses, he was saying that those people are actually blessed. I think the first one he said was “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Blessed are the poor in spirit. I kind of like that. “Poor in spirit” knows no boundaries. Anyone can be “poor in spirit.” Doesn’t matter what your social status is, whether you’re rich or poor, whether you’re a man or a woman, young or old, or any other category we put people in, you can be “poor in spirit.” For that matter, I bet every one of us has found ourselves “poor in spirit” at one time or another. We’ve all gone through hard times. So far in my life, I’ve been pretty lucky. My times of “poor in spirit” have been short, few, and far between. If

we're lucky, we have family, friends and our faith to help us through the hard times. But some of us aren't so lucky, and for those people, I guess it would be pretty comforting to hear that the poor in spirit are blessed, and the kingdom of heaven is theirs. And I guess for those of us who aren't "poor in spirit," at least not right now, maybe it's a good reminder for us to help out those who are, to be a blessing to them.

The next thing Jesus said was, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Again, like what he said about the poor in spirit, I didn't get the sense that he was giving us instruction, telling us that we should be poor in spirit and mourning, so much as offering comfort to those who are mourning. My friend Martha was with me and when she heard that, she wept. Martha is a widow and I thought it would bring her comfort hearing those words, but when she started crying, I asked her what's wrong? What upset her? She told me, she wasn't crying because she was upset, she was crying because it gave her hope. She said, that Jesus' words comforted her. There is comfort in the very promise God's comfort. To be given God's promise of comfort—even if the comfort is not immediate and complete—is itself a comfort.

Those first two blessings made sense, in a way. If you think of them as words of comfort for those who are poor in spirit and mourning and not instructions that we should be poor in spirit or mourning. But then Jesus started saying some things that I really had a hard time understanding. Calling things blessings, that sound more like curses to me. He said, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." And "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Blessed are the meek? Meek isn't a very appealing word. Not exactly something to aspire to. I doubt any parent has looked down at their newborn baby and said, "I hope you will grow up to be meek." And yet, it seems like that is what Jesus was telling us. A man near me started grumbling and said, "So he's telling us we should be weak. Just roll over and do whatever the Romans and the tax collectors tell us to do." And then another man said, "That's not what he said. Meek doesn't mean weak. It means humble. He's telling us that blessed are the humble. What's wrong with that? That's what the scriptures tell us, to walk humbly with our God." But the first man didn't like it. He said, "Well, I've been hungry and thirsty for righteousness all my life. For that matter, our people have been hungry and thirsty for righteousness long before I was even born. And I don't feel particularly blessed. Do you?" Then he stormed off but as he left the other man said, "Actually, I do. I do feel blessed. Now."

Next was "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. [and] Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." These ones made more sense to me. The way I see it, in a fair world, someone who is merciful to others should also be the recipient of mercy. Then again, this world isn't always fair. In fact, it hardly ever is. So what is Jesus talking about? Is this some far away time? Some time we can only imagine and hope to see? Or is Jesus calling us to make the world into a place where the merciful receive mercy? That's what I think. Jesus is calling his followers to make the world a place where the merciful are blessed. Where the pure in heart are blessed. I love that part: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." It's as though the seeing of God is in hearts.

We see God in our hearts, not with our eyes. Doesn't that make perfect sense? We know from scripture that humans cannot see God with our eyes. I don't think any human could look on God directly. Even Moses had to wear a veil to protect himself when he met God on the mountain top. So how can we see God? We see God with our hearts and our hearts must be pure in order to see God.

I also like what Jesus says about the peacemakers. If we are to love our neighbors and even love our enemies, surely being a peacemaker is the epitome of that. But I was a little confused about the "children of God" part. I asked Martha, "Aren't we all children of God?" Martha agreed that we are. She thought about it for a little bit and then she said, "Maybe Jesus is saying that we should strive to be peacemakers, to try to live up to what God intends for us, as God's children."

Before I had a chance to process what Martha said, Jesus really threw me off. He said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [and] 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." That was enough. I was about ready to leave, just like that man who was mad about "blessed are the meek." How can someone be blessed who is persecuted? It just doesn't make any sense. Yes, I know, it's not just "persecuted" it's "persecuted for righteousness' sake." But it still it's nonsense. How can it be a blessing to be persecuted? Then someone said, "That's what he said about the poor in spirit. 'theirs will be the kingdom of heaven.'" But it seems to me that being poor in spirit is the opposite of being persecuted for righteousness' sake. Wouldn't you have to have a pretty powerful spirit to submit yourself to persecution for the sake of righteousness? If the kingdom of heaven will belong to the people poor in spirit on one hand, and the kingdom of heaven will also belong to the people with strong enough spirit to be persecuted for righteousness' sake on the other hand, what does that say about those of us in the middle? Sounds like pretty good news for all of us.

But come on... "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." ? We are to rejoice if we are reviled, persecuted, if people say bad things about us because of Jesus? I thought, "What kind of guy is this anyway? What are we getting ourselves into by following him? Thanks but no thanks!" But the part that kept me from just going home and forgetting all about Jesus, was the second part—"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." And it reminded me of one of my favorite scriptures, from the scroll of the prophet Micah, "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God." And I realized that that was pretty much what Jesus was saying, in his own way. To be meek is to be humble and kind. To hunger and thirst for righteousness leads to doing justice. And if I have to choose between following the prophets by walking humbly with God or to not, well, I guess I'll choose the prophets' way. If I have to choose between being meek or not,

being merciful or not, being a peace maker or not, being pure in heart or not, well, the choice seems pretty clear. I'm not saying it's an easy thing to *do*, but it's the obvious *choice* to make. So... I'm following Jesus.