

A Shocking Reality

January 29, 2023

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and Sustainer, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, who abides in each of us. Amen.

Let me set the scene for you. Jesus had recently learned that John had been arrested. Once he had heard this news, he decided to move way from Nazareth to Capernaum, about 60 miles northeast. Capernaum was a seaside village on the north end of the Sea of Galilee. Once in Capernaum, Jesus immediately began to call people to follow him in his ministry. Last week, we heard how he called those fishermen, Peter, Andrew, James, and John. And as Jesus continued to call more followers, Matthew tells us, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (4:23). As Jesus went about this ministry, great crowds began to follow him. For the first time in a long time, someone was taking the time to speak to those whom the culture had cast aside; not only that, this person was taking the time to attend to their needs. It must have been a welcome relief to know someone actually cared for them, and they understandably flocked to him. Jesus was living a different kind of life. He was living the life we heard Micah call all of us to as he sought to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). When the people experienced what that was like, they wanted to be around him.

With the crowds following him, Matthew tells us today that Jesus took a break from them by heading up to the mountaintop, and his disciples followed. Once there, in the quiet of the moment, Jesus took the time to begin teaching his disciples about what God’s kingdom was like, and this is where our story begins today.

Now, before we move on, let me make another point about what is happening here. When Jesus began this teaching, Matthew says that only Jesus’ disciples were

present, but as this teaching continued the crowds began to form. Matthew says that, by the end of this teaching time, which we know as the *Sermon on the Mount*, the crowds had once again flocked to hear what Jesus had to say and that they amazed. Jesus was talking about living lives that sought to bring about justice, that treated others with dignity and kindness, and that valued all people. These words Jesus was sharing were so powerful, so life-giving, that the crowds could not stay away from him. I wonder why these same words don't inspire us to flock to Jesus as those listening in ancient times?

Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount with these words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3). He goes on to say that those who are meek, thirst for righteousness, are pure in heart, are peacemakers, are persecuted, are all blessed. I wonder how many people who fall into these categories really feel blessed. And to add to this, I also think it is important to note that in Jesus' day this word we translate as blessed (*makarioi*) was not really associated with a religious meaning. No, in those days, the word was used to describe the wealthy. In a world that valued people based on their financial status, Jesus chose this word because he wanted his followers to know that, in God's kingdom, wealth had to do with how God viewed us, not our material wealth or our social status. In God's kingdom, wealth is not measured in material things, but in who and whose we are. Although the world saw the people following Jesus as poor and unworthy, God saw them as wealthy and worthy of God's mercy, forgiveness and love. Blessed are those that the world rejects, for God knows them as God's children and those that will be welcomed into God's kingdom.

Jesus urges his disciples, then and now, to look at those around us differently than the culture does. In these words, Jesus challenges us, *no, actually, he commands us*, to

not measure a person by their possessions, but instead to see their character. Rather than merely taking pity on their poverty, or rather than judging their failings, we are invited to remind them that they are blessed by God and born for more than they've settled for. And rather than despise weakness, we are invited to see in it the truest point of meeting between God's children. After all, as we will discover after Good Friday that God reveals God's self to us most clearly at our places of deepest need.

In these teachings, Jesus says that in a world that proclaims that success is based on the amount of one's possessions, the amount of power one controls, or the amount of prestige one is granted, God says "no" to these things. Instead, Jesus wants us to know that real power, real wealth, and even real freedom comes from letting go, that strength shows itself in vulnerability, and that safety comes through trust and mutual regard in each other. In these words we call the *Beatitudes*, Jesus tells us that God blesses those that we might see as worthless, and that we are to do the same

So, what does all this mean for us today? Jesus, in the midst of the poverty, the sickness, the disease, and the rejection of the majority of those in his community, offered words that shocked those who heard them. Instead of condemning the poor and the helpless and telling them to "get with it," Jesus said, "You are blessed, you are wealthy." That is what the people needed to hear, and they flocked to him.

Maybe that is exactly what we need to do today. Maybe we need to be sharing this same blessing today to those who have been told by our culture that they are not blessed. That means we ought to be saying to those in the LBGTQIA+ community, "You are blessed, for you are a child of God," and not just say it, but actually live it. We ought to be saying to the poor, "You are blessed, for God has claimed you," and then treat them

with dignity and kindness. We ought to say to those communities where justice is not equitable, communities of color, communities of immigrants and any community where we continue to see unjust treatment, “You too are blessed, and God’s justice is for you, too.” Do these kinds of blessings shock you? They should because they do not fit the social norms of our day. However, our social norms are not God’s social norms, our ways are not God’s ways, and our thoughts are not God’s thoughts. Some 2000 years ago, on a hillside at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus began his ministry with words that most likely shocked the world. In a world that taught that only the materially wealthy and powerful received God’s blessing, Jesus said differently.

God’s love is shocking because it is for everyone. God’s forgiveness is shocking because it is for everyone. God’s mercy is shocking because it is for everyone. God’s justice is shocking because it is for everyone. And this is what you and I are called to share with the world, we are called to proclaim God’s justice. And in doing so, we are commanded to remind those who have been cast out that they are blessed, and we are to seek to make sure that they truly are blessed. And in so doing, God says to you, “You too are blessed, for you are mine.” Amen.