

Sermon on Matthew 5:1-12  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany, January 29, 2017  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Sometimes you write a sermon on Thursday, and by Sunday the whole world has changed. This was the case this past week. On Thursday I began a sermon about the power of God's blessing, from *The Beatitudes* of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, but I have revised it each day. I still can't keep up with the changes in our world. When I went to sleep last night, this is where I left off...

So, what does it mean to *be blessed*? When somebody sneezes, we will often say "bless you" – which is a wish that the person will be "blessed" with health, or healing. So blessing has something to do with health or wholeness. When we ask for God's blessing in prayer, we are asking for God's favor, peace and protection. Or we ask God to bless others. *God bless you!*

Over the years, many people of faith came to see God's blessings in the good fortune and favor that came upon people when they were faithful to God and obedient to God's law. It was understood that if you were "blessed by God" it could be seen in your material prosperity. So it stood to reason that if you were wealthy, healthy and comfortable, it must be a sign of God's blessing, for one's faithfulness – like a reward. Taken further, then one's poverty must be a sign of one's lack of faithfulness, or disobedience to God's law. It seems reasonable! So, if wealth is a sign of God's blessing and favor, then poverty must be a sign of disfavor – right? Such thinking still remains in our minds, at least in our subconscious. Although we don't say that the rich are blessed by God and the poor are not, or that these are signs of favor or disfavor, deep inside such thinking is there. And of course there are preachers today in our world who preach the *prosperity gospel or the gospel of wealth*. Some churches actually teach that if you are faithful, then God will bless you with a good home, prosperity, and health. Such churches can become very popular, not only among the wealthy, but also among people who have a history of struggling for their subsistence. And don't we often say, when we are fortunate, that we are "blessed"? Do we deserve our good fortune – are our blessings "earned"? Is it just good luck? Or does blessing come from God's grace alone? Then why are some "blessed" with material blessings, and some seem to have only bad things happen in their lives? Is it "fate" or God's will? You see – it is dangerous theologically to believe that God's blessing is connected to our faithfulness – because it messes up our thinking about God! It turns God into some despicable tyrant who turns on and off the "blessing spigot" on a whim! Or we just blame the poor for their poverty.

So today we read from the opening of Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*. Jesus had gone up a mountain after seeing the crowds of people coming to him, where he sat down and was joined by his disciples. He taught them about the reign of God (which many of us grew up calling "the kingdom of God"). The disciples had followed Jesus as their rabbi, hoping to learn from him insights about God and how to live a faithful life. Like John the Baptist, Jesus called people to "*repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!*" They wanted to know how could they be blessed by God? What should they do to inherit the kingdom? And where did Jesus get this power to heal the sick, and cure people from leprosy, epilepsy and demon possession? They wanted to learn more about this good news of God, which Jesus taught in a whole new way. Jesus turned their whole world upside down with his teaching about God's blessing. When everything they had learned taught them that God's blessing was shown on the righteous, who showed obedience and confident faith, Jesus said: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*"

What did Jesus mean? Didn't God bless the strong, the confident, the prosperous? Since when did God bless the poor, the meek, and those who mourn? Well, Jesus said that the poor in spirit were blessed with God's kingdom, that those mourning their dead would receive comfort, and the meek would inherit the earth. This was totally unexpected and it totally expanded the disciples' understanding of "God's blessing". Jesus continued with these words:

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* This was taking "blessing" to a whole new level! Then he directed his words directly at the disciples:

*"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."*

How could this be? Nobody wants to be reviled by others, or persecuted and talked about harshly. We all want to be liked, or respected for what we say or do. They must have thought, since when is persecution and slander an "honor"? Well, Jesus said, expect it, for that is how people have always treated prophets.

Can you relate to that, sisters and brothers? I don't want others to speak ill of me, or tell lies about me. I don't think you do, either! It's our human nature to want to be "liked", and have others respect us for what we say or do. Jesus said to his disciples that it will not always be so, if you follow me, and share with others

what I have taught you. People will laugh at you, mock you, hate you, disrespect you. So get used to it. This is a hard teaching!

People of all faiths have experienced persecution for centuries, because governments find their loyalty suspect. Christians have been persecuted ever since Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified. Sometimes we as the Church have also persecuted others, demanded faith at the edge of a sword, or made other people become “subjects” of the Church and its leaders by force. But Jesus is speaking here of how those who truly follow him, and are faithful to God’s word, can expect to be humiliated and persecuted. Because faith requires us to walk with the poor in spirit, embrace the grieving with comfort, stand alongside the meek, give mercy instead of seeking revenge, and be peacemakers – when everyone else is trying to win. In a world that sees only winners or losers, God sees each one of us as beloved children to be blessed!

These teachings of Jesus about God’s surprising blessing for unexpected people are very instructive for us today. For we see growing evidence of the world’s disdain for those who are suffering from grief. We see how many human beings have been uprooted from their homes and forced out of their own countries by terrorism, civil war, famine, drought, violence or poverty. They may be refugees who have been misplaced by war or religious persecution. They may be immigrants crossing borders, seeking a better life for their children – just like our ancestors did. We see victims of crime or survivors of domestic violence or abuse, and people in our own communities who suffer from poverty, lack of education, mental illness or chemical abuse.

Christian churches have long had traditions of caring for the poor, the sick and the vulnerable, the elderly, the orphan and the widow, with hospitals, schools, soup kitchens, food shelves and emergency shelters. Simple ways to show God’s blessing and compassion. But these days the stakes are much higher, as many nations, including our own, are beginning to reject the idea of taking responsibility for caring for the poor and vulnerable, saying we can’t afford it, demanding that everyone pull their own weight. Some nations, including our own, are taking steps to reject refugees from crossing borders, making them wait longer in camps, or not even accepting them when they have lost so much and taken so many risks to find safety in a new land. On Friday our new president issued an executive order to ban Muslims from several Middle Eastern countries, including refugees from Syria fleeing civil war, effective immediately. And our own government is even considering *building a wall* along our border with Mexico to keep human beings out, from crossing that border to live or to work. A wall we can’t afford, which will not work for its intended purpose, which goes against our nation’s values. It seems that the “blessing” which America was as a haven to political and religious refugees has become a curse of broken promises and dreams.

Now is the time for people of faith to take a stand, and for the Church to stand up, speak up, and maybe even “act up”, even at the risk of disapproval by our government, our neighbors, friends, relatives, and even other Christians. It makes us all uneasy to stand alongside people who are persecuted or disdained because they are “undocumented” – “illegal immigrants” some of them. It goes against our nature to cause tension, to oppose authorities, or agitate others. I don’t like it myself! We are peaceful, law-abiding people. In the past we have too often failed to stand with those who are persecuted, whether they were Native peoples, human beings brought in chains from Africa as slaves, or their descendents seeking civil rights. This is our sin. But now, we have a new chance to act differently. We teach in the Church that all human beings are beloved children of God, and no human being can be “illegal”. One’s existence cannot be “unlawful” – because such a term goes against God’s law of creation! This makes any such law null and void, according to God’s law, which is higher than any human law, and so we must resist. In our first lesson, we heard this from the prophet Micah:

*“The Lord has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

So it appears that for the first time in our history, sisters and brothers, that we Christians in America will have to join people of other faiths and good will, to oppose actions by our own government or police in order to protect human beings, families, men, women or children, who are marked for deportation because they are undocumented. We will have to oppose our own government’s policies which prevent refugees from escaping violence and war in their home country and entering our own for safety. We may possibly face persecution or even prosecution if we do, because governments have never taken kindly to civil disobedience to their laws, no matter how “unlawful” such laws might be.

This will be a matter of conscience and faith for each of us – as individuals or as a church – as no one can be forced to take the same course of action as others. You may not agree – and you don’t have to. We will all have to pray on this, and think clearly about actions and consequences. But time is not our friend. We have already witnessed the policies being proposed in Washington, D.C., and cities and churches across America are making statements and decisions about compliance or resistance. Some of us have already pledged to resist, a decision nobody makes lightly, without counting the cost.

Now, perhaps none of what is threatened will happen. Perhaps none of us will have to take this step of faith. But it looks more and more likely that we will, as refugees with visas have already been detained at U.S. airports, and thousands of people have come out in protest. Whatever happens, I leave you with this encouragement, from the gospel we have heard today from our Lord Jesus, who said:

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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.”*

Thanks be to God. Amen.

And may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.