

For Such a Time as This: *And for Every Time*
Rev. Dr. Kathryn Nystrand Dwyer
Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ
November 1, 2020

Matthew 5:1-12

I am an outcomes kind of gal. I set a goal and I go after it. Now through the years with you I have learned how process is important – especially for congregational decision making. I get it. And if I am honest with you, getting that process done in a thorough and satisfying way has become an outcome for me in its own right. I find it immensely satisfying to check off the boxes on my to-do list and to look back on what I have accomplished in a day or a week or over years. I am not quite sure why I am wired that way, but I know I am not alone.

Have we ever had a week where we collectively feel so focused on the outcomes? The whole world is watching for the outcomes of our Tuesday elections and I know that so many of you have worked tirelessly for a long time in the lead up to this. You have made phone calls, written postcards, given money, and then given more money. Tomorrow there will be vigils happening all over the country praying for outcomes. Praying for peace. Praying for Democracy.

What is a preacher to say on a day when it feels as though there is so much at stake? What am I to say to a group who I know is both weary and wired, anxious and agitated?

I think the first thing to say is what my sister always says to me when she finds me this way: “Breathe.”

And then I want to invite us to take a step back and seek out some timeless wisdom for the living of these days. Hear this passage, as read by our Middlers. It is the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount found in the early chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. Take a look.

5 When Jesus^[a] saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

¹⁰ *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ *“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely^[b] on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

This is one of the most familiar passages of scripture there is and also perhaps one of the most confusing. Sometimes it reads like a puzzle. Sometimes it reads like a to-do list. Sometimes it reads like beautiful poetry. I would like to suggest that for today, these words provide timeless wisdom that we can hold on to for such a time as this.

When I was in high school, I remember learning that the beatitudes were the “BE – attitudes,” a to-do list of sorts. I remember looking at this list and thinking it was overwhelming, as if I had to do *all of these things* – many of which we never wish on ourselves, but we know is often a part of life (mourning, persecution for example). If we look closely, though, we will see that nowhere in here are the words “should” or “ought.” The beatitudes are not a to-do list.

Following seminary, my understanding of this passage broadened. I understood this as text in which Jesus was describing what he saw. It wasn’t that one person was all of these things, but he was actually looking out on the crowd and describing what he saw – people who loved so passionately they were in deep mourning, people who woke up every morning with a desire for the world to be better – it was like a constant hunger that motivated everything they worked for. I have preached on this passage at Rock Spring with that lens, of Jesus describing what he saw in front of him – a wide array of people, with different gifts and passions, all working together to bring about the world we think God intends for us.

And now in 2020, I see this a little differently. I was helped by the commentator Debie Thomas’ reflections on this passage.¹ She started by noticing how often today we talk about getting back to “normal.” She is so right. That is a constant theme through so many conversations. We want to get back to in-person worship and getting rid of these masks. I want to pull out all of my plates and invite you all to cram into my home for dinner. We want to touch one another again.

But what is “normal?” Who do we let define normal? Is it normal to promote the pleasure of some at the risk of others? Is it normal to pay attention to the loudest and most aggressive voice in the room? Is it normal to think only about the safety and security of our own family? Is it normal to flaunt our privilege and wealth in order to get what we want? Is it normal to carry AK-47s around in parks or rallies?

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2800>

This passage from the opening of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is describing *God's normal*.

Frederich Buechner puts it this way, *"The world says, 'Mind your own business,' and Jesus says, 'There is no such thing as your own business.' The world says, 'Follow the wisest course and be a success,' and Jesus says, 'Follow me and be crucified.' The world says, 'Drive carefully — the life you save may be your own' — and Jesus says, 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.' The world says, 'Law and order,' and Jesus says, 'Love.' The world says, 'Get' and Jesus says, 'Give.' In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion."*

The Beatitudes are not a to-do list; they are a description of what God's normal looks like. It should be no surprise that this is the assigned text for All Saints Day. The saints, those who have seen much life and lived it well, know that life is full of ups and downs, twists and surprises, joyous moments and painful ones too.

While we feel as though we might be in the most important and most difficult time in history, we stand on the shoulders of saints who have gone before us who moved through numerous wars, the Great Depression, Earthquakes, Hurricanes, Floods, 9/11 and the Spanish Flu of 1918. And with each of these crises we could name saints who we remember, but there are so many we do not.

During the flu of 1918 all the beds in Pennsylvania's 31 hospitals were filled. So the nurses made house calls. In a crib beside one mother was six-week-old baby who had not been bathed for 4 days and was wet and cold. The family had no coal, and the three children were shivering and hungry. The nurse gave care to the sick and bathed and fed the baby. She made a wood fire in the stove and prepared food for the other children. She then found a kind neighbor to look after the children. I imagine that nurse, after leaving that home, had no idea how the family fared in the days that followed. ²

The saints are those who live God's values. They are the ones who bear witness to love with a capital L even when it is painful. Even when it is difficult. Their lives are centered on healing, on peace, on justice. However, these Beatitudes are not about outcomes. There is no promise of prosperity or that our side will win.

There is a formula to these Beatitudes. It is "if this, then that." The blessing (meaning the acknowledgment that something is valued, sacred, and important) is God's blessing for us now, but the fulfillment is later. The beatitudes are a blessing for those seeking to live as they believe God wants us to live. It is a blessing who for those who seek to do what is right, for those who love and care for their neighbor even when they could not disagree with them more. That is difficult news for someone who is outcome oriented like me! But it is timeless wisdom.

² History.com (12 Times People Confronted a Crisis with Kindness)

Here is how Jesus might phrase this if he were with us today:

Blessed are those who are discouraged by the news, by their conversations with their family, who are restless at night and worried about our future ... for theirs will be a life of wholeness.

Blessed are those who mourn over a loving partnership shared for 59 years, for memories of driving through the hillside, family fun, hard work on important projects and tender care for one another ... for you will be comforted.

Blessed are the ones who don't seek any attention but who write thousands of postcards, who stands in line for hours to vote, who leaves baked goods or flowers or notes of encouragement on the steps of friends and neighbors .. for you will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who peacefully protest, who write letters to their elected officials, who make advocacy posts on Instagram and Facebook, for they will be filled.

Blessed are those who forgive another's outrage, who rise above the fear and the angry hate speech, and give a message of love .. for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are those who try to see the best in their adversary, who wake up every morning and try to do the right thing, who spend time trying to center on what God most desires ... for they will see God.

Blessed are those who have a caravan of cars and trucks try to run them off the road because they are cheering for a different party. Blessed are those who face intimidation at the polls, for theirs in the realm of God.

Blessed are all of you, even when you have a terrible, horrible, no good day ... because you are guided by God's normal and will experience the transcendent web of life that connects all of humanity.

Our timeless wisdom for today is that not everything is about outcomes. It's about daily, hourly, sometimes by the minute what are we going to focus on and what we will do. On November 4, regardless of what happens, we will wake up as God's people.

On All Saints Day we are reminded that there is an arc from the past to the present and to the future – and every human matters, every action matters, but it is not all up to one person or one group of persons. As religious scholar Tim Beach-Verhey puts it, “The saints provide a glimpse of God's already in the midst of our not-yet.”

And as the author of Hebrew writes, *...since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside everything that impedes us and the sin that so easily entangles us. And let us run with perseverance the race laid out for us. Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection. (Hebrews 12:1-2)*

May it be so. Amen.

