

The interrelated themes of mercy, justice, and humility tie together the texts in Micah and Matthew, both of which contain a profound call to live godly and Christian lives. To live in the manner of Jesus Christ requires that there be a manifestation of "God in me" that can be seen by others, that is genuine and so can help other people see and experience God's love for themselves. The message of God through Micah: To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God requires more than a set of life rules; it requires a deep relationship with God, and it is this message that is echoed, and extended and amplified in the Beatitudes of Jesus.

In this sermon I invite you to pay close attention to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5.

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

The Mountain is a reminder of places of encounter between God and people; Jesus seated - the customary posture for the teacher. These words that begin what we call the Sermon on the Mount are words for all, but especially for those who have already committed themselves to Jesus ... these teachings are deep and lasting, they are for the church, and for all who plan and any who intend to live for Jesus – these words are for us who would claim to be Christ's people, Christians, followers of the way and the Savior.

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.

There is one part of me that can almost hear the tone of Jesus' voice. It is a blend of compassion and passion that is inviting me, drawing me forward, begging me, to see God's realm in a new way. In my mind's eye, I am in that crowd on the hillside; I am all ears, desperate to hear some good news. I need to hear Jesus say that there is something of real and lasting worth in this world of image and idols, power games and violence. I long to hear Jesus describe what it is that really matters, to speak to me of the sacred, to lay out everything that is good and holy and perfect and lasting.

Jesus speaks to the large crowd, and yet each word seems to be just for me. Each word opens another closed off place in my heart and mind. How does Jesus know all these feelings that I have? Why is he speaking to me? But I note that I am not afraid that these words are so direct, because something about Jesus is familiar. It's as if my inner being has known him since before time.

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. But wait just a second Jesus – my life has taught me that the meek seldom seem to get very far.

At the start of his career, legendary showman P.T. Barnum displayed an exhibit entitled "The Happy Family," which consisted of a lion, a tiger, a panther ... and a baby lamb. People flocked to see it, and Barnum was asked whether he planned to keep the exhibit. "The display will become a permanent feature," he is quoted as saying, "if the supply of lambs holds out."

The Joyful Noiseletter carried a story once about a pastor who had wrestled with being meek. One year he was asked by his congregation's Personnel Committee to evaluate his ministry in comparison to the ministry of Jesus. Beth, Frank, – please, please don't ask me to do this! His response included: Jesus walks on water, I slip on the ice. Jesus changes water into wine, I change water into coffee. Jesus welcomes the children, I have the children's sermon. Jesus raises the dead, I wake teenagers. And Jesus cleanses lepers, I change dirty diapers. Truly, blessed are you Jesus, the meek One!

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.

I trust these words, difficult as they are to comprehend in my humanity because these are words of Jesus, it is Jesus who is offering them – the promise of discovering my true self, the promise of seeing God, as I am ready to make my God-life the central priority of who I am.

Jesus calls me, Jesus calls all of us into the topsy-turvy world of the kingdom of God, where many of the traditional markers we associate with a blessed and happy life are turned upside down - success, knowledge, security, self-confidence, give way to humility, hunger, grief, and persecution.

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

In a sermon following the terrifying events of September 11, 2001, nationally known preacher and author, Tony Campolo, wondered how different our history would be if, after the first Gulf War, we had not attempted a complete embargo on Iraq, leading at least indirectly to the death of over 100,000 Iraqis, mostly children from malnutrition and lack of medical care. He wondered aloud what would have happened if we had taken all of our military and political might and had simply dumped tons of food and medicine on Iraq? He asked some hard questions in that sermon, questions like: Do you think Saddam Hussein would be able to keep his unholy grip on that land? What if, rather than violating the holy places of Islam, we had violated the grip of Islamic dictators with our generosity? I know what you are thinking: "Crazy are the peacemakers." But it is Jesus and Jesus' words that invite us to be willing to pause even just for a moment to think about such questions, and to wonder about all Jesus said and is saying.

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 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.

Jesus' words sounds so sure, Jesus words are so sure, because they arise from Jesus' own experience of humanity and people and life, both ordinary life, and life of God, life. Such words reveal Jesus' intimate acquaintance both with the needs of people and with the kingdom of God. Jesus doesn't just hope that those who mourn will be comforted, he knows it, he guarantees it, Jesus assures it. And so it is, that when Jesus finishes speaking, his words still hang in the air, and they carry me home in a cloud of comfort and courage, washing me with the rain of something new – hope.

And so was then and so it is now, Jesus gives us a witness of God's kindness. People then and people now are drawn to Jesus by virtue of his kindness as much as by the persuasive power of his words. Jesus' kindness catches us off balance, because too often we imagine kindness as an occasional act as opposed to a lifestyle. Jesus' kindness challenges us because we equate kindness with weakness rather than seeing that kindness requires great strength.

This kindness, God's kindness is likely the best description of the attitude that we need to have toward life in general and our neighbor in particular.

If 'justice' is the driving force of the universe, then 'kindness' is the grease in the gears.

If 'justice' is the gravitational principle of the universe, then 'kindness' is the 'weak force' which makes the other forces work together.

If 'justice' is the symphonic theme of our best human efforts, then 'kindness' is the conductor, urging first one instrument and then another to come forward, take a solo riff and shine in the applause.

Biblical scholar Rabbi Steven Schwarzchild was once asked "How would you translate blessing?" "There is no one word that will do," the rabbi replied. "It is something like 'on the right path,' 'on the way the Creator wants us to go.' It is the opposite of the word for sin, which means 'losing your way.'"

To this helpful thought I would like to add one further thought that comes from the Message paraphrase of this passage, it begins in this way: When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule."

To all of us who are apprenticed to Jesus, to all of us who are and who would follow Him, Jesus says, "You are blessed, when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule." And who among us has not been at the end of our rope? Who among us has never been so very aware of our need of a friend and a Savior? Even today, due to all manner of situations and circumstances, some of us sense that our fingers are feeling the last few feet or the very final inches of our rope slide through our fingers. Such moments can, according to Jesus, lead us not to despair but to hope, for since we can no longer depend or rely on ourselves, there is more room for God and God's rule, God's Kingdom.

Friends, friends of Jesus when you realize that you can't do everything you want to do or be everything you think you should be, when you face your sins and know you need help to do something about it, when you admit your need of a Savior, when you are ready to embrace a new and truly God-centered lifestyle... you are blessed, for it is still possible to live the blessed life, the life of righteousness in harmony with God.

In truth, the words and the presence of Jesus mean that all this is easier to do than you think, though still full of challenge. Because it is Jesus who is calling us let us take hold of the promises of God and live the blessed life, allowing God to fill and complete us, as we serve God and witness to God's Kingdom.

Today we recognize and commission 10% of our membership to the hugely important, life-giving, life-changing, church-strengthening ministry of DeaconCare; today we welcome new members into the life of the congregation; today we reflect on the year of service that was 2010 and today we look to the future, we see very clearly much of what is meant by the three priorities - Welcome, Involve, Nurture - that combine to give us the acronym WIN. As the Church of Jesus Christ, the Church of the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, the Church of the Beatitudes, the Church of the crucified and risen and living Jesus our calling and purpose is to be intentionally Welcoming, Involving and Nurturing one another and all who would come to share in the life of Oakland Avenue in the very life and heartbeat of our Lord.

We will WIN – we will welcome, involve and nurture as we recognize that we do this not in our own strength, not by our own power, but only as we reach the end of our rope and take hold of God's promises.

To you who are already doing some, much, all, of what Jesus taught and teaches, I say Blessed, Fortunate, On the right road are you, the poor in spirit.

Blessed are you when you come to the end of your rope, when you are willing to let yourselves be shaped by the word of God, to re-examine your views, to believe you haven't yet understood everything, to be taken by surprise, to have your mind changed, to see your convictions, your principles, your tidy systems and everything you once took for granted swept out from under you, and to face the fact, once for all, that God will always be with you, even at the end of your rope, especially at the end of your rope, and that God can and does ask anything and everything of you.

Blessed are you, fortunate are you, on the right road are you, when you hear these words and live by them, blessed are you.

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule." You are Blessed – Jesus says so! So live the blessed life! Amen.