

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 29, 2017  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Micah 6: 1-8 Psalm 15 Matthew 5: 1-12

**Psalm 15**

A Psalm of David.

<sup>1</sup> O Lord, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?  
<sup>2</sup> Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,  
and speak the truth from their heart;  
<sup>3</sup> who do not slander with their tongue,  
and do no evil to their friends,  
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;  
<sup>4</sup> in whose eyes the wicked are despised,  
but who honor those who fear the Lord;  
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;  
<sup>5</sup> who do not lend money at interest,  
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.  
Those who do these things shall never be moved.

*The Beatitudes*

**Matthew 5: 1-12**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

<sup>4</sup> “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

<sup>7</sup> “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup> “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup> “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

Sermon

***“O Lord, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?”***

The Psalmist raises a voice that speaks for the whole people of God.  
Like our spiritual fore bearers and our coffee shop buddies, we want to know.  
Tell us, Lord, who, who may abide in your tent?  
Speak to us a word for this day.  
Channel through your Scriptures the guidance and grace we need,  
and please add a touch of gratitude and fortitude.  
We have before us lessons from the Psalms, the Prophet Micah,  
and the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ.  
Surely in this mix and missives there is a word for such a time as this.

A word about the Word.

Matthew 5, 6, and 7 are a collection of Jesus’ preaching collected into one sermon.  
A friend in another city decided he would deliver the Sermon on the Mount,  
in its entirety, without explanation or application.  
*“After church let out,” he said, “two people had something to say about the sermon.  
One said it was the best sermon she had ever heard;  
the other said it was the worst.”*  
Probably the same comments Jesus of Nazareth got afterward.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount begins with a litany we know as the beatitudes.  
Beatitude is a Latin word to describe a statement in the indicative mood  
declaring people to be in a privileged, fortunate circumstance.

Jesus of Nazareth did not invent the beatitude form;  
similar language can be found elsewhere  
in wisdom literature and prophetic writings.  
Jesus would have been familiar with the form and the content.

In religious writings set down prior to Jesus,  
beatitudes declare the present and future blessedness  
of those who are in dire circumstances,  
and who will be vindicated  
in the eschatological coming of God’s  
kingdom.

These words of hope are not instructions;  
they are declarations.

These blessings are not practical advice for successful living;  
beatitudes are prophetic statements grounded in the faith and  
conviction  
that God is alive and present,

that God's kingdom is coming, not yet here, drawing  
nearer,  
and yet is already being realized in the here  
and now.  
Our prophets and wisdom teachers understood  
that as people of faith we live  
in the blessed balance of the Already and the Not Yet,  
and that is okay.

So, when Jesus preaches and teaches in Galilee,  
He begins with a litany of beatitudes.

Jesus Christ pronounces a blessing on authentic disciples  
in the Christian community.

Someone might say to you, "I am so blessed," or "I'm too blessed to be stressed."  
What he or she might be saying between the lines is  
they are thankful for their family or health or wealth,  
their home or employment or shiny new shoes.  
And that is fine. Amen and amen.

Jesus is coming at being blessed and a blessing  
from a *slightly* different angle.  
Blessings are gifts of God for whatever your circumstance.  
To be blessed does not mean you are overwhelmed  
with good things or prosperity.  
As a matter of fact,  
comfort food and comfortable things and a life spent on a Lazy Boy  
may fog or dim or block our view & receptivity of God's loving  
presence.

The Good News is that to be blessed by God  
means that Jesus is with you in your vulnerable places.  
He brings light into your shadow places;  
He sits with you in your lonely places,  
He wipes away our tears, without judgment, with compassion.

Coming from the lips of Christ,  
the beatitudes speak directly  
to the character and destiny of his beloved disciples.  
The difference between the beatitudes of wisdom literature or the prophets  
and those of the Living Christ  
is that Jesus' Word brings into being what he declares.  
What he states, what he blesses, what he promises *will come to fruition*.  
Let's hear that again.  
What Jesus states, what Jesus blesses, what Jesus promises *will come to fruition*.

He unconditionally declares to the whole people of God that

*those who are merciful will receive mercy.  
Those who are meek shall inherit the earth.  
Those who are peacemakers shall be called children of God.  
Those who mourn will be comforted.*

Blessings are gifts of God for whatever your circumstance.  
You may be mourning,  
    and God is with you to bless you in your grief.  
You may be poor in spirit,  
    and God is with you to bless you in your despair.  
You may be widowed or have lost a child or a good friend,  
    and God is with you to bless you.

And then Jesus has the audacity and the faith in God  
    to preach to the whole people of God,  
*“Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven.”*

God’s presence blesses us in our vulnerability and our vulnerable places.  
God blesses us as well by sending folks, regular folks, friends and strangers,  
    to intercede and interact and intersect  
        in our lives to offer hope and help and hospitality.  
God’s love is relational.  
God craves a relationship with you,  
    and as an extension of this love  
        the Creator’s will is for you and me and all of us together  
            to have healthy and healing relationships with each  
        other.

We who know both sides of broken promises and broken bodies,  
    broken relationships and broken piggy banks,  
    broken hearts and the broken earth of cemeteries  
        also know the blessings.

We know we could not be here today if it were not for the blessed presence  
    of the One who Created and Creates.

Blessings are gifts of God for whatever our circumstance.

And, my friends, these gifts are to be shared.  
Think of God’s blessings of presence as a spiritual spiral,  
    a spirit-filled spiral moving ever forward,  
        circling and evolving, transforming, changing and relating,  
            moving on and beckoning us along  
                to join in the dance with the Spirit  
                    as we spiral into a new day of light  
                and love.

We who have been blessed are now to be a blessing to one another.

Which brings us around to the question on our minds:

***“O Lord, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?”***

The Psalmist deals with this head on.

The Lord responds (for God always answers prayers!):

*<sup>2</sup> Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,  
and speak the truth from their heart;  
<sup>3</sup> who do not slander with their tongue,  
and do no evil to their friends,  
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;  
<sup>4</sup> in whose eyes the wicked are despised,  
but who honor those who fear the Lord;  
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;  
<sup>5</sup> who do not lend money at interest,  
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.  
Those who do these things shall never be moved.*

Let's point out the obvious.

God does not choose who shall dwell or serve or be allowed into the holy tent  
based on gender, race, ethnicity, social status,  
residential address or documentation,  
nationality, practice of religion,  
beauty, height, weight, hair color,  
or from what school you graduated.

A friend recently returned from Louisiana  
where he said on Saturday nights grown people, adults,  
stood in front of their homes  
and argued aloud with their neighbors  
about high school football games  
that ended two generations ago.

We do not have to work very hard to draw lines in the sand  
or find differences we think matter a whole lot,  
while in God's eyes they matter not at all.

None of this matters according to God's word  
when it comes to deciding  
who shall dwell in the holy tent of the Lord.

What matters is what is on the heart.

*Do you love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul,  
with all your mind, and with all your strength?*

What matters are your relationships.

*Do you love your neighbor as yourself?*

What matters is our integrity, our morality, our character.  
*The day we shall be judged not by the color of our skin  
but by the content of our character  
is here, and now, in this holy tent of the Lord.*

Christ's church is full of characters.  
(Tempting, but I am not going to go there...)

And it is full of people with character.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
affirms that God works in and through people from all walks of life.  
Therefore we do not differentiate roles or responsibilities  
based on gender or race, ethnicity or sexual orientation.  
We affirm that we can and we do follow servant leaders  
of moral character and mind  
regardless of their race or gender,  
social status or sexual orientation.  
We are an anti-racist and pro-reconciling community of faith.

What is the US government's motto? *"If you see something say something."*  
When we see any injustice being done to our neighbors  
to shut them out from God's holy tent and sacred hill then we speak up.  
We say something.

If we were to block one single soul from entering this sanctuary,  
you and I would say it's not right and it's not Christian and it's not  
acceptable.

Is it acceptable for fellow descendants of Abraham and Sarah  
to be excluded from these shores because they call God Allah?  
As Christians we are also descendants of Abraham and Sarah;  
as Americans we are descendants of immigrant families  
who sailed here, whether willingly or in chains, from distant  
shores.

We can relate personally and spiritually and historically  
to those now on the outside looking in,  
and the spirit in our soul cries out for justice, for mercy, for  
sanctuary,  
for the blessings of God's presence  
to be made real, for them, for us, for all of us  
together.

Which brings home to us the Psalmist's question that echoes in sanctuaries  
today.

***"O Lord, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?"***

We who have been blessed are now to be a blessing to one another.  
The only requirement of God is that we know right from the start  
we don't meet the requirement!

Serving and loving in Jesus' name is never, ever about our ability.  
Following God is always about our availability.

We who have found hospitality and a home in the holy tent of the Lord  
are to open wide the doors, the gates, the drawbridge,  
and extend the peace of Christ.

We who have been blessed  
are hereby called, commissioned, and compelled to bless others.

This Word was first delivered in the Sermon on the Mount.

What Jesus states, what Jesus blesses, what Jesus promises *will come to fruition*.  
Now what we say, what we bless, what we promise in God's name *will come to  
fruition*.

Be blessed and a blessing.

Listen to the silent anguish of a broken heart.

Share your story.

Wipe a tear.

Hold a hand.

Welcome the stranger.

Be a positive presence in someone's, anyone's life, and you will be blessed  
with the *power of the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*