

We are continuing in our series, *One Kingdom. Indivisible*. It is a series in which we are partnering with several other churches from all over the Bay Area to demonstrate the unity we hold as citizens of the kingdom of God.

We are narrative beings, living out many stories from which we find our identity, but the story of the kingdom of God transcends these narratives and is the one that shapes who we are as followers of Jesus.

Constantine's Enduring Influence

One lesser-known moment in church history came in AD 313. It was the 4th-century conversion of Emperor Constantine and the signing of the Edict of Milan.

Right as the Jesus movement was gaining steam, Emperor Constantine, being the politician he was, began to view this organic uprising of Jesus communities as threatening to the positioning of power and so most scholars would say that he converted to Christianity not as a genuine encounter with Jesus but rather as a result of political opportunism. Then shortly following his so-called conversion, he signed the Edict of Milan in AD 313, which legalized Christianity and freed its followers from state-instituted persecutions. Consequently, this gave rise to the political ascent of Christianity and officially launched what we call the age of Christendom.

At first blush, this could be viewed a few ways. Certainly, the lessening of persecution against the early believers was a good thing. But the other side of the coin also exists. The church was launched on a damaging trajectory by conflating state power and the church. Until this point, the church was a persecuted minority movement that remained a distinct alternative society and resisted any politicization.

Eventually, following the edict of Milan, Christianity would become the official religion of the Roman Empire. The distinctiveness of the Jesus movement was compromised as its identity was subsumed into the Roman Empire. The distinctive virtues of the kingdom of God were blurred into the virtues of the state, and this movement of Jesus became co-opted for the advancement of the Roman Empire.

This failure to remain distinct, and the Jesus movement to join to political power has continued to tempt the people of God throughout the centuries. Dating back to Israel's demands for a king like all the other nations (1 Sam. 8). The temptation to rule like all the others has always been there, and it insidiously persists today. The Constantinian shift has launched the church into a trajectory aimed at something less than God's ideal.

Last week, Mark made the really important point that if you were to summarize all of Jesus' teachings down to one thesis statement, if you

were to boil down the central purpose of his coming and breaking into the world, it would be: "...Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17).

Now, a few notes about this statement. First, repent carries the connotation of rethinking, reconsidering in light of something. The announcement Jesus is making is worthy of rethinking the whole of your life. This is what it means to repent, we rethink, reconsider, turn, ask forgiveness, etc. All of this because we have heard of another type of Good News.

And so the question that persists, "What is the distinctive nature of the kingdom of God? What differentiates the kingdom of God from all other kingdoms?"

The Context - Ethics Embedded

The answer comes right in Matthew's Gospel's narrative, and it is masterful what Matthew and Jesus do here. Jesus announces that the fulfillment of the story of the scriptures is met in him. The arrival of the kingdom of God is taking place right in his person. And then the very first thing Jesus does is enlist individuals into this new Kingdom Movement. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him" (vv. 19-20). Jesus goes on from there and finds two other fishermen and invites them along as well.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. vv. 23-25

Now, remember, while Rome certainly had a lot to offer the world, at the same time, the Roman world was brutally cut-throat. There were no social security nets. If you couldn't provide for yourself, the Roman world cared very little for you. And so, who is this crowd that is forming in front of Jesus? It is a crowd filled with those from the slums, from the bad part of town, along with the down and out. It was those who had nothing to offer.

And here is why the context is essential: "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them" (vv. 5:1-2). Matthew is comparing Jesus to Moses, and he does so brilliantly through the text.

In the same way that Moses went up on a mountain top to address the newly formed people of God after they were taken out of slavery to deliver teaching on what it means to be the people of God, Jesus is ascending a mountain top and delivering teaching on what it means to be the people of God.

It is into this setting that I believe the blessings become electric and hums with subversion. Because all present are hearing this message for the first time, and it takes on the edge of "good news" that is utterly profound.

It is difficult for us to catch the edge in these particular blessing that Jesus gives because we are so removed from their historical moment. But here is one way to demonstrate this. I believe what Jesus is doing here is all about the reversal of perception. Because the arrival of the kingdom of God in Jesus was a shocking reversal of who we understand as blessed. It represents a distinctive element of what the kingdom of God is about. Or as Paul would say in 1 Corinthians,

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. 1 Corinthians 1:27-29

The distinctiveness of the kingdom of God is a reversal of what and who the blessed are. And so Jesus ascends the mountain and begins his sermon, his discourse on what it means to live into the kingdom of God and begins:

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.

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown 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 because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:3-12

It is a fascinatingly odd way to start a sermon, to start teaching on the good life in God's kingdom. It is a radical shift in perspective. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek.

I think it is difficult for us to fully grasp the reversal of what Jesus does in the Beatitudes. This is the reversal, the surprise of the kingdom of God, it is working itself through and manifesting itself through the least likely. The light is flipped on, and those who are blessed are not in any way who the world would bless.

Jesus is brilliant. He ascends a mountain, which is reminiscent of the people of God taking on a new sort of identity as the Israelites did at Sinai. They are anticipating a teaching that would communicate to them what it means to be successful, but Jesus flips the script and says, "Blessed are you."

Blessed

All of this revolves around this word, blessed. The entire text hinges on its meaning. If we get the concept of blessed wrong, we go on a different trajectory of meaning. Blessed is interpreted from the Greek word makarios. It is a word that is used all over Jewish and pagan writings from the time of Jesus, but it is tough to translate into English as we don't have a direct equivalent. Probably the most common translation is what you have right before you, "blessed." But this can be confused with the word that means blessing from God as the result of achieving these statuses.

Another translation sometimes employed is the word "happy," but this carries all sorts of baggage from the modern conceptions of the philosophy of the "good life" and modern conceptions of what it means to be happy.

Fortunate

But the general tone of the word is more along the lines of a salutation - "Congrats, blessed are you for such and such, etc.," "Wonderful news!" So Jesus begins his sermon with this declaration, "Congrats, Blessed are you." But the list of the eight types of people who are blessed, as demonstrated by the context, is a bizarre list to what we would understand about the kingdom of God. If you are reading this for the very first time, you may think Jesus is crazy.

But for Jesus, the Kingdom has come to the zeros, the left out and broken. Jesus flips the light on, and shockingly says, "No, you are the fortunate ones." Jesus jumps onto the scene and says, "Surprise, the kingdom of God is here, and it requires an entire reversal of how you see yourself, your identity, status, and value." An utterly brilliant teaching technique.

We must resist the temptation to assume these are action items that Jesus is giving us. This is not the case. There are no commands in this text. Rather, these are statements of the reality of the kingdom of God and how it functions. Theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, writes this about the list,

Too often those characteristics - the poor in spirit, those that mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted - are turned into ideals we must strive to attain. As ideals, they can become formulas for power rather than descriptions of the kind of people characteristic of the

new age brought by Christ; for the beatitudes are not general recommendations for anyone but describe those who have been washed by the blood of the Lamb. It is they who will hunger and thirst no more, having had their lives transformed by Christ's cross and resurrection. Thus Jesus does not tell us that we should try to be poor in spirit, or meek, or peacemakers. He simply says that many who are called into his kingdom will themselves so constituted.

The great surprise that these people who are not significant or honored in their society are precisely the ones who have received the honor to be first among those let into God's kingdom. See what Jesus is doing here. Rather than listing the standards to attempt to achieve, rather than setting the bar high for the entrance into the Kingdom of God, Jesus brilliantly flips the script. It is those that have nothing to offer that the invitation is first extended. *"So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16).*

I want to go through these blessings while making a few notes and comments on how they operate. But don't think of these as individually distinct, but rather they all go together as a unified whole.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3).

Well, what does that mean? One has to look at who Jesus is talking to, and on what occasion is Jesus speaking? Who are these crowds with their particular makeup and diversity, on the occasion of Jesus announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God?

By "the poor in spirit" as Dallas Willard defines this phrase as "the spiritual zeros — the spiritually bankrupt, deprived and deficient, the spiritual beggars, those without a wisp of religion" They are blessed because, despite what they have to offer, the kingdom of God is available to them. Their material and spiritual situation has afforded them a position of blessing because the Kingdom is available for them. These are who Jesus is talking to right in front of him. The poor, the destitute, those who no one admires, always overlooked. They are the ones that are poor in Spirit. They are both economically poor and spiritually zero.

And Jesus looks at them and says, this condition that you are so intimately familiar with. This experience of being in such a lowly position is actually a favorable position for you to be in because "yours is the kingdom of heaven." Present tense, it is available to them now. And Jesus' understanding of humanity is that the poor in spirit tend to be the ones who most readily accept the kingdom of God. And I think he is right.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (v. 4).

Jesus moves to those who are mourning. Those who both grieve in their experiences, tragedy, injustice, and death. Jesus says those who grieve and mourn their loss and the experience of pain, those who grieve their contribution to the brokenness of the world.

Blessed are those who are so bothered and broken by the loss and failure of the world to operate as normal. Blessed are they because they grieve, they mourn the brokenness. Blessed are those who mourn, for they don't choose a lifestyle of distracting away the injustice. Blessed are those who stare down the brokenness of the world and don't anesthetize themselves from the reality of the world. They are the ones whom God is with. God is with you.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (v. 5).

Blessed are those who suffer, and who have been humbled: the shy ones, the intimidated, the mild and unassertive. To be meek is to be unimportant. It is those who have suffered and been humbled. Whereas the world values strength and domination, the kingdom of God values quiet meekness—a humility of spirit and the ability to walk humbly.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (vv. 6).

At the risk of coming across pedantic, think back to the last time you had a deep hunger or thirst for food. I imagine it is not something most of us feel very often, but think back to that last time. There's a visceral, deep longing to have that feeling satiated. To enjoy a glass of water, or eat a loaf of bread, whatever it is. It is not a good feeling. It is not something that you are hoping for or wanting to experience.

It is unpleasant; it affects your mind; it affects your brain. It controls the whole of who you are. And here's the thing, you don't just choose to become thirsty. Instead, it is something that happens to you because you are without that thing - food, water, etc. So Jesus' point here is that "blessed" are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness because they don't have it. God is with, and God is for those who have a longing for righteousness.

The word righteousness carries two primary connotations—a right relationship with God and right relationship with others. A righteous act is something that is done to rectify the relationship between people or between God. This is the work of justice. Jesus' point is profound, "Blessed, are those who lack justice and long for it." Blessed are the oppressed, the marginalized. Blessed are those who experience the injustice of racism. Blessed are the communities that experience injustice.

Blessed are the ones who have a deep sense and longing to see the world made right because they have experienced its dark underbelly. Blessed are the people who are so deeply bothered and refuse to ignore the tragedy of what is playing out in our world.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (v. 7).

Mercy is a simple word. It is a small act of kindness and grace to those in trouble. This is counter to how our world understands the blessed, for it is the merciful that get taken advantage of. Where the rival kingdom of this world values a cut-throat, survival of the fittest, the kingdom of God blessed the merciful.

Blessed are the merciful, who don't know what to do but show kindness. They don't have the answers, they may not be able to solve all the

problems, but they humanize the situation and show mercy. Blessed are those who do what they can for the brokenness. They can give a foretaste, a small piece of what is going on in God's kingdom.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (v. 8).

These are the ones that don't seek influence and fame, but rather, recognize their pure desire for God and the world to be made right. They seek to connect with the heart of the God, who desires to see the world right.

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

If you are bothered and broken by the world, you will eventually find yourself in moments in which you seek to make peace. Not keep the peace, but make peace. And this is an arduous, difficult road to walk. Blessed are those who insert themselves into the conflict to work toward justice. God is with those who enter the mess, enter the brokenness, and seek to bring about reconciliation.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. vv. 10-12

If you become the kind of person that is broken by the injustice. If you are deeply torn by the pain of the world and seek to do good, this will probably end up being the hardest thing you have ever done, and you will face persecution for the sake of righteousness.

Jesus brilliantly subverts all that we have come to understand about who is really well-off. Jesus is radically redefining who is actually blessed and is the exact opposite of what they would have thought in the 1st century, and is still not what we would think of today. It is a radical invitation of welcome and embrace of the least of these. It is stunning. It is brilliant. And it is utterly challenging to embrace.

Beatitudes for Today

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the broken, both spiritually and physically. Blessed are those who are spiritually bankrupt, those who feel deprived and deficient, and those who have lost their jobs, homes, and sense of security. Blessed are those experiencing the underside of a broken economy, and those who believe they have nothing to offer - because theirs is the kingdom of God here and now.

Blessed are those who mourn

Blessed are the depressed, the anxious, the sad, the grieving, those who spend countless nights in tears. Blessed are the ones experiencing the devastation of the loss of a loved one, those grieving a broken marriage, or the devastation of a wayward child - because the day is coming when God will wipe away every tear and death itself will be no more.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

Blessed are the meek

Blessed are the powerless, the hopeless, the shy, the ones who don't fit in. Blessed are the awkward, the misunderstood and marginalized, those who don't fit the mold of what the world says you are to be. Blessed are the mild and unassertive - because one day you will assume the position of co-ruling with God.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

Blessed are those who are broken relationally, who recognize their own sin's contribution to fractured relationships with God and others. Blessed are those who are unstable, those who come from broken homes, and daily face the pain of failed relationships. Blessed are those who are stuck in cycles of sin, those suffering on the underside of injustice and systemic racism. Blessed are those who have grown weary of justice deferred and continually appear overlooked and the oppressed minority that continually face the brokenness of a world gone awry - because one-day justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Blessed are the merciful and the pure in heart

Blessed are the ones who are overlooked and pushed out. Blessed are those who are taken advantage of because of their kindness, those who choose mercy over domination, and seek righteousness above all. Blessed are the ones who meet violence with kindness - because one day they too will be overwhelmed by God's kindness and mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers

Blessed are those who denounce division, and enter into the center of conflict to seek peace and shalom. Blessed are those suffering in the hard work of reconciliation, those who are tired and worn out but continue to sow seeds of grace and welcome. Blessed are the ones who are willing to endure pain and sacrifice for others' sake because they are like God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness

Blessed are the faithful Christians in a hostile post-Christian world. Blessed are the ones who are ridiculed, mocked, and insulted for their faith, looked down upon and seen as archaic. Blessed are those who stand up for what is right, those longing to be faithful through challenging times - because the kingdom of God is theirs here and now.

The kingdom of God is marked by a grand reversal of those considered blessed. This is the distinct, alternative kingdom of God. This is the vision of unity that we rally behind. The Kingdom that flips the world upside down, or maybe better understood—right-side up. And so, may we learn to embrace this backward reality.

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