

The Beatitudes – A Community of Goodwill

Listen...with the ear of your heart – as we dive into the Scripture.

SET THE SCENE

The Beatitudes have been with me all summer. Ever since John Fleischer, Matthew Joffe, Gabriel Nicolosi-Wolfe, Locklin Palmer, Jeffrey Tobian, Roran Furgason, Ross Bregel, Adam Palmer, Karen Morris, and I rode to Camp Massanetta for the Middle School Conference in June in a fifteen-passenger van – with me driving! The theme of the Conference was *The Beatitudes* and they were well covered during our 3 ½ day stay just outside of Harrisonburg, VA. I kept them in my heart and mind; when it was time to select a sermon topic, the Beatitudes returned to me with alacrity. Yes, enveloping me in *The Beatitudes* for the month of August seemed “right” and a bit of a homecoming. How often does one get to do two deep dives of the same Scripture in a three-month period? At least for me, not very often.

Karen offered to lead us ALL in an energizer this morning – we learned many at Massanetta! Energizers get the crowd literally moving. There is song, dance, and loud music with energizers. The team leading the energizers are on stage teaching the song and the dance with SO MUCH ENERGY you have to get up and dance! I graciously declined Karen’s kind offer for all of us to kick up our heels above our hips and hearts while the rock music pounds!

WHAT IS A BEATITUDE?

The original Greek word used for “blessed” was *Makarios*. Makarios can also mean happy, joyful, or blissful. To be blessed is to be more than happy. Life doesn’t always go our way, sometimes we get sick, or someone gets hurt and of course these don’t make us happy. But to be blessed is to be full of joy on the inside even if things aren’t perfect. It’s a deeper joy because we know, as believers, that the spirit of God lives in us.

To set the background of the Beatitudes, we find in Matthew 4: 18-22, that Jesus calls his disciples. Then in Matthew 4: 23-25 Jesus ministers to the crowds of people. *Immediately* following this, Jesus teaches the Beatitudes. This is very early in Jesus' ministry, and it was a strong, unique message to the people listening.

The Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 1-12) are the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. As the scripture we just listened to tells us, "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up to the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them" (Matthew 5: 1). Tod Lindberg in his article *What the Beatitudes Teach – Jesus' Community of Goodwill* states that "The Beatitudes provide a dizzying commentary designed to turn upside down the political and social world of the Roman Empire of Caesar Augustus and of the Jewish religious elite of Judea and Jerusalem." The Beatitudes are the opening salvo of an energizing and essential reappraisal of political and social affairs, applying not only to

Jesus' time but to our time. *The Harper Collins Study Bible* notes that the Beatitudes focus on both future and present ethics (p. 1674). This sermon will focus on both the present and future ethics of the community of goodwill at the ground level.

What is the community of goodwill?

In the Beatitudes, Jesus outlines those who are privileged, the lucky ones of their day. But it is not priests, emperors, and the wealthy who enjoy this favor. It is the common people: the poor, the meek, the persecuted, the peacemakers. Lindberg emphasizes, "*What cannot be taken away from them is their potential to live rightly by one another.*" To live rightly with one another. Jesus claims that the blessed are living in the kingdom that is not organized by the top down, but by the bottom up. The Harper Collins Study Bible notes that "Jesus both reinterprets the old law and offers a new law" (p. 1674) with the Beatitudes.

With the Beatitudes, Jesus creates a landscape of the ways in which it is possible to be a good person with respect to others – various forms of human goodness. As Christians searching to be good people, we don't need to look any further than the Beatitudes. When Jesus was asked which were the greatest Commandments, ³⁷ He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22: 37-40). How are the Beatitudes linked to these two great commandments? I believe that the Beatitudes are Jesus' extension of these two commandments, giving us clear, concise language that creates the community of goodwill. This community of goodwill calls us to act in certain ways. Where have you seen, experienced this kind of community of goodwill? I have seen it in my former home church, Emmanuel Episcopal in historic Mt. Vernon and here at Towson Presbyterian Church.

Let me tell you a story about Emmanuel. The 150th anniversary of the parish was nearly upon us, and the Rector asked a group of 8-10 parishioners (they do committees in the Episcopal Church as well!) to plan the month-long celebration. The group members hadn't all worked together before, but as the planning got underway, we got to know one another, trust one another, laugh with one another.

As I think about the Beatitudes, our community of goodwill leaned into three of them: Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth; Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God; and Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Why these three? The "Meek" were gentle and calm; they didn't take out their frustrations and emotions on others – they controlled their actions and behaviors and helped move our process gently along. The pure in heart were with us as well. It's easy for everyone to understand doing the right thing on the outside for others to see, but what Jesus is talking

about here is changing the heart, the way we think and feel on the inside where we are doing the right things for the right reason. We had some bumps in the road about the month-long celebration, but committee members changed not only their actions but their hearts to accommodate the group and our goals. We saw God in those people. Finally, the peacemakers. A peacemaker isn't someone who backs down from things and hides in a corner; a peacemaker is someone who works to make things right, to make peace for others. Making peace requires doing and taking action. Our peacemakers worked with the pure in heart to get those committee members to change their heart. It was a trusted dance amongst us.

Where have I seen the community of goodwill at Towson Presbyterian? So many places, so many members, so many interwoven moments that create that larger community of goodwill. Now remember, I'm the Director of Children, Youth and Family Ministries and that's where most of my community of goodwill experiences comes from. Our church school

teachers year after year lead our three year-olds to our 5th graders with peace, love, and pure in heart. From September to May, the teachers are the support network for our children. They teach the Bible stories so our children know them well. The teachers willingly bring art & creativity into the classrooms, and they bring joy to the children. I love teaching Church School and I love observing teachers do their amazing work. It's a weekly miracle from church members who are merciful and peacemakers.

Being part of the Youth Program this past year has been a wonder for me. I love these middle & high school students. All the Youth Advisors and Joel love them as well. The community of goodwill weaves into Youth Group most often when we share the meal that is provided by a TPC Youth family. Truth and questions and laughter come forward at these dinners. All are treated with respect, kindness, and love. Magic happens on Sunday nights at TPC. It's a great community of goodwill.

And of course, mission trips and conferences bring Youth together in special, transformational ways. During the summer of 2021, we did a mission trip right here in Baltimore – because of COVID. We visited four sites in five days and our Youth stepped up to the plate. It was hot, hard work and there were times that everyone was “done.” But everyone kept their patience, continued to work hard at weeding – we did A LOT of weeding that week – stayed hydrated and gave their all. The community of goodwill was seen by Youth helping each other out with the rocks we had to lift and the humor that was shared that wasn’t sarcastic or snarky. The gardens we weeded gave us all grace.

I want to talk about the Towson Presbyterian staff. I have worked on teams that fought, gossiped, stabbed one another in the back, baldly lied to your face and there was very little of the community of goodwill – the ability to forgive was out the door. It was awful.

The Towson Presbyterian staff is 180 degrees from that other team. This is the best team I've ever been on or consulted with. We are positive, productive, loving, full of joyous laughter, everyone works hard, we are kind to one another AND to the congregation. I pinch myself every week when we got into staff meeting – it's amazing. We are a microcosm community of goodwill that is highly functional. All the Beatitudes show up in our system. It's not perfect, but it's close.

To step a little farther into bigger systems, we need churches to be forces of goodwill. We have to build that goodwill with perseverance, dedication and clear vision. It is desperately needed in our world and churches are one of the few places that we talk about God, Jesus, creating the community that is inclusive, curious, compassionate, and courageous. This takes guts. Hard work, staying on target. Jesus calls us to do this joyous and challenging work. To stand up to the privileged, the rule makers, the people holding onto power who do not support the poor, the mourners, the meek, those who hunger

and thirst after righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted for righteousness' sake.

And what about the future of Towson Presbyterian? We are called to do life differently, we are called to follow Jesus. One of his most precious gifts to us as Christians are The Beatitudes. We just have to follow the call.

God promises that we will be blessed if we follow these teachings – but it won't be easy. We are all still figuring out how to do these things. Do not be discouraged. God calls us to be different than the rest of the world – to be a community of goodwill. May we kick up our legs to our hips and hearts to come closer to Jesus.

BENEDICTION:

My friends, know we belong in this community of goodwill called Towson Presbyterian Church. Know that God wants us to follow the Beatitudes and keep pushing forward to positively shape this community and the world.

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.— Amen.