

January 29, 2023

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

They WILL Inherit the Kingdom

The men shuffle into the cafeteria and form a line. They wear heavy jackets and worn-out shoes. Their faces bear the marks of life on the street. Many of them have injuries, a bruised face, missing teeth, a limp, a sore hip or injured foot. You can tell they don't receive much medical care. Their hands are rough and calloused. But they are so polite. They greet us as they slide down the counter to collect their dinner trays, one by one. They thank us for coming and for the food. They bless us for being there. I'm starting to recognize some of them. The man with the scraggly white beard. The tall black man who always asks if we are a family. The short Hispanic man with the tired eyes. The young men who look way too young to be there. I look at them and remember what Jesus said: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God. Jesus teaches his disciples this lesson and it feels like we are being let in on a secret. For the poor are not blessed. And neither are those who mourn or who are meek or merciful. They are looked down on. They are pitied. No one thinks they have God's blessing in this world of power

struggles and high achievement. But Jesus says that kingdom of God is different. Things there will be turned upside down. The bottom will be on the top. And the last will be first. And the least will be the greatest. The unlucky and unfortunate and cursed, they will be blessed.

Jesus teaches us that in the kingdom of God, things will be turned around. How things are is not how they will be. Those without blessing will be blessed. The word in Greek that Jesus uses is makarios. It means you have God's favor and approval. It means you live a charmed life.

All the good stuff comes your way and it's not random luck, it's a holy gift to you. The powers that be like you. Why? Who knows. You have money and health and success and all the things that make for a good, prosperous life, the kind of life everyone wants.

Some people are lucky. They seem to have God's blessing. Everything goes right for them. Everything is a win. In the Donald Duck comic books, there is a character named Gladstone Gander. Gladstone Gander always has everything go right for him, even when he isn't trying. He is opposite of Donald Duck who seems to have everything go wrong for him. It's frustrating for Donald, because it's Gladstone who always finds

the lost treasure map. Who trips over a gold nugget. Who has the winning lottery ticket blow into his lap. Money literally falls out of the sky into his hat. It's like there is always some otherworldly force working in his favor. Much to Donald Duck's chagrin.

There are people who have that kind of luck. They get the great job. They get the classes they want. They get the awards. They win the raffle and the lottery. They get picked first for every team and everyone loves them. And they never seem to have set-backs or problems. It's like God is looking out for them. Unlike those of us, who can't seem to catch a break. We get left out. We get one rejection after another, one problem after another. Oh, another setback at work. Another argument at home. Another hospital visit. Another big bill. If it weren't for bad luck, we'd have no luck at all. We have the kind of life no one wants.

Those listening to Jesus in our story felt the same way. They didn't feel blessed. They weren't lucky by anyone's estimation. They were poor and they were struggling. They had no money or power. I mean, they were listening to an itinerant preacher on a mountain side. These people were people desperate for hope of any kind. They were the ones Jesus

was talking about; the poor in spirit, the grieving. They were meek and small and hungry for righteousness. Jesus knows these people. They are his people. And he knows how hard life can be. And he tells them that **THEY** are the ones blessed by God.

Listen, Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, who don't have much. Who are short on joy and peace and hope. Blessed are those living day to day, with nothing to fall back on. Blessed are those unable to get on top of things. It's not about how things appear on the surface. It's about how things are underneath. The world focuses on the outside, but God focuses on the inside. What is hidden. What is buried. In God's kingdom, things are upside down and inside out. The smallest are the biggest. The servant is the greatest. Giving means receiving. Suffering leads to joy. Death leads to life. Those who have nothing will have everything.

Blessed are those who mourn. Those who have lost what they love and feel the absence of God. Those who have lost a parent, a child, a spouse. Who feel split in two and that life has lost its meaning. God sees you. God loves you. You will be comforted. In the absence of God is the

presence of God. In the nothing is the everything. It is a mystery and a paradox that only grace can reveal. Blessed are the meek, Jesus says.

The quiet, the shy, the timid. Those who never ask for anything. Those who don't want to be a bother. Those who are often overlooked on the sidelines. Everyone says that fortune favors the bold. But not in the kingdom of God. The meek shall have their turn and THEY will inherit the earth.

In God's kingdom, everything is turned around. Instead of top down, it's bottom up. Small is great. Big is little. The ones with nothing will be the ones with everything. Blessed are the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. The ones who have not had justice.

The ones denied a fair shake. Tyre Nickols, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd. All those experiencing every day that they system is stacked against them. All those who are famished for fairness and equality. All who are starving to feel like a human being and their lives matter as much as everyone else's.

In God's Kingdom, things will be reversed. Everything will be turned around. The first will be last. And the last will be first. The weak will

finally be strong. The ones who have been mocked and put down will be lifted up. The merciful, who are called cowards and wimps, THEY will receive mercy. The pure in heart, called simple and naïve, THEY will see God. The peacemakers, who people hate because they refuse to fight and want to put the guns away, THEY will be called children of God. The persecuted, the rejected, the shamed, the ones pushed away by the world, THEIRS will be the kingdom of God. That is how things will work, Jesus says. God's blessings sink to the bottom; they don't just float to the top.

God's favor is for the least favorable. That's what Jesus teaches us. Success and wealth do not equal divine blessing. And poverty and struggle do not equal God's curse. You must look past the surface. You must look beyond what is obvious. God's blessing is built on hope and faith in what WILL be. What we can't see yet and can only believe. On the hidden treasure of grace. A shared meal. A cucumber grown in a garden. A child's smile. A sunset. Someone who listens. Someone who holds your hand in the dark.

Jesus sees God's blessing differently. He invites us to see it differently. He doesn't want us to see things only as they are. But as they WILL be in God's kingdom. Blessed are the poor who will be rich. Blessed are the empty who WILL be full. Blessed are the broken who will be whole. Blessed are the conflicted who WILL have peace. We live in the present as if it is the future. As if we gotten the house loan. As if we've received the college acceptance letter. As if we've been offered the job that starts next week. It hasn't happened yet, but we know it WILL. Between now and then, we don't worry because our future is assured. This is the promise of the kingdom of God. Things will be flipped over and turned around and set right. There will be healing. There will be welcome. There will be freedom. Especially for those who don't have it. Every chaotic, unruly, imperfect life is blessed by God. And I know it's backwards. It's upside down. The apostle Paul says, it's foolishness. But God in Jesus Christ chose what is foolish to shame the wise. God chose what is weak to shame the strong. There isn't much glory in going from blessing to blessing. But going from curse and blessing, that's something. Going from the bottom to the top. Going from emptiness to

fullness. Going from death to life, from the cross to the resurrection.

That's something. And that's what it means to follow Jesus.

Yesterday, the leaders of the four Presbyterian churches of Woodford County met here in our fellowship hall. We met to talk about our challenges and our opportunities and about how the world has changed. One of the things we talked about most was the need for us to become more like Jesus. Less concerned with membership and more concerned with love. Less concerned about our survival and more concerned about the survival of others. Less concerned about our crumbling kingdom that is and more focused on the kingdom of God that WILL be. More devoted to following Jesus. To acting as if the poor are blessed and those hunger for what is right will be filled. As if God's blessing, God's favor, God's attention is for the merciful and meek, the persecuted and pure in heart. Our hope is in the paradox of the kingdom of God. In the foolishness of the cross. In the stumbling block of humble service. In the triumphant way of forgiveness and grace. God's blessing is for the least and the last and the lost in all of us. And we hope in what Jesus promises WILL be.

We hope in the resurrection that only love can accomplish. The impossible thing that only God can do.