

Psalm 15; Matthew 5: 1-2 Blessed and Stressed

Jesus saw the crowds; he went up the mountain and began to teach. Do you know who else in the Scripture went up the mountain? In the Hebrew Scripture, “Went up to the mountain” is a trademark for Moses. Moses went up to the Mt. Sinai and received the Ten Commandments. Matthew was writing this Gospel for his community, an emerging community of Jewish followers of Jesus, grappling with the question of their Faith in God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and being the follower of Jesus the Christ, God’s anointed. They were being persecuted for it, and people were uttering all kinds of evil against them falsely on Jesus’s account. Matthew reminds the church that Jesus’s teachings are not separate but are rooted in the Torah given to the people on Mt. Sinai.

But something is different now. Jesus chose to begin teaching in Galilee the land of Gentiles. In the Jewish tradition, there were rather strict rules about who could approach the house of God, the Temple. Psalm 15 Susanna read for us, is a kind of Psalm called an “entrance liturgy,” a psalm that was performed at the temple gates before entering the holy space and sets out what you must do to qualify to enter the temple.

Last week heard how Jesus began his ministry after John the Baptist was locked up. He began to preach “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” the same message as John the Baptist’s. But something is different now. Jesus begins to teach what this kingdom of heaven is like to all who come to listen to him, and this is the land of the Gentiles. And Jesus is bringing the invitation to the kingdom of heaven there. Today’s pericope, known as the Beatitudes, is the first lesson Jesus gives.

I start this morning with a confession: I’ve been stressed lately. The New Year has only begun. We are still in January, and yet I’ve already heard enough about conflicts and crimes, and tragedies of the personal, national, and global scales, to make me want to stay in bed and pull a blanket over my head for the rest of the year. I’m not going to name them in a litany of sad things happening in our world, because I know you are already carrying them, for we feel the weight of it in our bodies and in our hearts. I know you didn’t come to church to hear that this morning.

But can we start there? Can we start by acknowledging life is hard more often than we’d like? I’m not just talking about our own lives but the lives that we witness all around us, too; the lives of the people whom we lift up in our prayers.

You have heard the popular saying “too blessed to be stressed,” and if this saying has been helpful to you in navigating times of stress, I am glad. But I’ve also heard this phrase used to downplay or deny the very real stress in our lives, as if to say, if only we realized how blessed we are, we shouldn’t or couldn’t be stressed.

But in today’s Gospel reading, the section in Matthew called the Beatitudes, Jesus declares “blessed” the people who are facing some stressful situations. We hear Jesus bring his words of blessings into the midst of our stress-filled lives, his words forming like a ray of sunshine breaking through an oppressively stormy sky.

Jesus doesn't downplay or negate but acknowledges and validates the tough and difficult reality we live and lifts us up. The Beatitudes is the good news for the stressed.

The poor in spirit: those who know their need for God. Regardless of what they have or do not have, whether materially, physically, emotionally, spiritually, "the poor in spirit" knows one's security, wholeness and well-being is dependent on God. Sometimes it takes a great fall on our part to remember this, because the world urges us to be self-reliant and self-sufficient. Jesus reminds us, as we stress over "being enough and having enough," the kingdom of heaven with all its richness is already ours, now, as our blessing.

Those who mourn: I said I'd been stressed, but "stressed" is too general an expression. Sometimes, at a deep core of our stress is a grief, and we lament the cause of our grief. When we look around our families and community that is dear to us, as a caring parent or spouse or a friend, we cannot help but lament what we see.

In a news program covering the fatal shootings in California this past week, a woman whose child had been killed in a school shooting years ago said, "we shouldn't have to live like this." Ain't that the truth. Hers is the voice of all who suffer the injustice in our world and those who stand in solidarity with them; it is the voice of truth crying out "we live in the world that does not have to be."

Those who are aware of the difference between the world as it is and the world as God desires it to be, cannot help but mourn. They are the ones who earnestly pray, "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." And to them Jesus brings the good news that they will be comforted by God, who answers their prayers.

And when the God's will is done on earth as it is in heave, it is the Meek who inherit the earth. The quality of meekness comes from a humility of being poor in spirit. The Meek know their need to follow God and not the way of the world that pits one against another for survival, creating injustice and oppression.

And as they live on this earth, knowing full well their need for God to guide them, they would find themselves hungering for righteousness. Hunger and thirst, too, are major stressors in our lives. Jesus brings the good news that their hunger for righteousness will be filled by God. Resisting the way of the world, refusing to play the power game of dominance and aggression, is sure to create stress in this life on earth.

One of my dear friends who is a chaplain recently endured a great stress working for an organization which she believed had their priority wrong. As a human services organization, her employer organization's mission was to serve the people, but time and again, she witnessed the people suffered while the organization prioritized profits and convenience. She resisted going along with the

practice she knew to be wrong and tried to walk the difficult path of remaining true to the Spirit who guided her. She suffered the loss of her job, and it's been stressful. To many people like her, who stay faithful in the right relationship with God, which is what righteousness means, God will satisfy their hunger and thirst.

And staying in a faithful relationship with God is the doing of the pure heart who looks for no other gods or false idols. Devoted to the Holy One, the Divine Spirit and the Creator of all as their one and only, they will see God; we will see and recognize God in unexpected people and at unexpected places. We will see that God who is present everywhere, even in the faces of those whom we disagree and disapprove and consider them our enemy.

And it is when we start to see God in our enemy, the work of peacemaking begins. Peacemakers make peace where there is no peace. Peacemaking, then, is a creative act, often an uphill, stressful task, thrusting us into the midst of conflict. And it doesn't end at the removal of conflict but goes from there to the creation of loving harmony and justice within communities, and it doesn't even end there. The Hebrew meaning of the word Shalom for peace means the well-being of the whole created order, peace in every corner of creation, not just among different peoples and nations, but in our relationship with the natural world, too.

The blessing here is God claims them as God's children, and if children of God, they, too, will inherit the kingdom of heaven. On earth, we toil to build bridges between foes and tear down the walls of division and separation, among God's people, empowered by the blessings they belong to the household of the kingdom of heaven.

The Beatitudes, or the Blessedness fills our stressed-filled lives as we look to God as our source of richness where we are poor, as we reach out to God as our source of strength where we are weak and our source of mercy, so we can treat one another with mercy. Blessedness permeates our being even as we carry the wounds this business of living on this earth brings, the wounds in our lives and of the world.

These Beatitudes are not 9 separate personal qualities that would get you into the kingdom of heaven, or 9 different kinds of people who are allowed in the kingdom of heaven. Rather, these describes the community of people like you and me, the church folks, who are aware that the world we have created does not quite reflect the world God desires for us. The stress is given, it is assumed, as Jesus reminds us that the ultimate reality, the kingdom of heaven exists as surely as there is a bright blue sky just above the dark stormy clouds under which we live.

We live in a stress-filled world, AND we are blessed by God to create a grace-filled spots where that ray of light from the kingdom of heaven falls, and to carry that light wherever we go as the blessing from above.

Just as Matthew was writing this to his church, struggling mightily to follow Christ in the hostile world, the blessed community that the Beatitudes describe is our church, poor in spirit relying solely on God's presence in our midst. Even as we grieve and lament the brokenness and the sin of our world, let us hunger and thirst for righteousness and pursue mercy and make peace wherever there is peace to be made.

The tension we feel as stress, as we go about the business of living in this world, is real, and so is God's blessings that empowers us to turn it into the creative energy that blesses, comforts, and heals. Yes, it is only January and some mornings, I may feel like staying in bed with the cover over my head. Then again, I am reminded how blessed I am to have this community, our church, to respond to God's invitation.

We have the whole year ahead of us to share the blessings with this beautiful corner of the world. Amen.