

January 22 – The Beatitudes

It seems like everyone from Capernaum and the surrounding region was there that day. At least everyone who was desperately seeking something. They all pressed in on this healer everyone had been raving about.

There's old Jacob. He's already lost one leg to disease and now has a gaping sore on his other ankle.

There's Miriam. Word has it her illness started with a large tumor in her breast. Now she looks a sickly yellow and can barely breathe. Her daughter and son-in-law brought her on a makeshift stretcher made of goatskin.

There's Anna. Her husband died two years ago. Recently, her only child, a boy, became ill with a fever and chills. A painful rash developed and within days he was dead. She's beside herself with grief.

And Joel. He just seems to have the worst luck. As the 4th son, his inheritance was small and the land poor for farming. He rented more land but still barely grew enough to feed his family. The one goat they had for milk died. He was behind on his taxes and deeply in debt to his landowner.

The religious authorities kept harping about making sacrifices at the Temple and giving money. But he was beginning to wonder why he should bother. Even if he could do it, it didn't seem like the religious leaders – or even God – had done anything for him.

There's faithful Isaac. He's the epitome of a good Jewish father. Faithful, generous, humble. But his sons have grown increasingly angry with the oppressive rule of Rome. They have joined a group known as Zealots who want to train an army to overthrow Rome. Isaac fears for their lives, but he also believes there has to be a better way...a way not steeped in violence. He wonders if this teacher everyone raves about might have some answers.

The crowd presses in on Jesus. He walks through the crowd, healing some with a word and a touch. But the crowd is overwhelming. Jesus breaks free from the crowd and climbs the side of the mountain to a plateau. His disciples follow him.

He begins to speak - ³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” ⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

You look around and see that those crowded around to hear Jesus, to touch him, are the very people he is talking about. If ever there was a bunch who didn't appear to be blessed, this was it.

But as he spoke, a strange thing happened. People began to feel like something was different...something was changing. Jesus was describing a world that would be totally different.

And with his words, it seemed like it had already started happening. Was this the moment people began to believe Jesus really was the long promised Messiah, the ruler who would come to set things right?

It was a strange way to start...but you had to admit his words were doing something to the crowd. Something even the most powerful revolutionary speakers couldn't.

And then you notice something else. People are beginning to act differently.

A couple of older women go and sit with Anna, the young mother mourning the death of her child. The women know they can't take the grief away. But they can walk beside her and help her carry it.

A woman and a man approach Jacob. They clean his wound with wine and oil and bandage it. They promise to visit him daily to take care of the wound and help with tasks he can't do – like getting good food.

A group of farmers gathers around Joel. They realize that some of them have the ability to share the yield from their own crops so Joel can weather his storm and feed his family. They realize that in any given year, some do better than others and they can help each other when hard times hit.

A group clears a path so Miriam can be carried to Jesus for his healing touch.

Isaac's friends gather around him and hear his worries about his sons. They agree to go with him to talk to them. Maybe they would consider joining the Jesus movement instead of the Zealots.

As Jesus spoke there on that mountain side, the vision that he presented of the kingdom of heaven gave people hope. It helped them envision the beautiful world that God intended at

creation. It gave them a glimpse of what it would look like when God rules over heaven and earth.

But those words did something else. They made people act differently. They acted like they were finding ways to actually live in that kingdom now.

For centuries, the Jewish religious leaders had taught God's law. It was a law that was meant to provide for the poor. It was a law meant to keep violence in check. It was a law that gave the Jewish people a religious system to maintain and nurture their relationship with God. Jesus wasn't undoing those laws.

But for centuries, too many of their rulers violated those laws. The rulers exploited the poor, the humble, the downtrodden. Those who hungered and thirsted for righteousness, like for example the prophets, were met with scorn and even violence.

Even the religious authorities back in the day were more likely to back the corrupt kings. The scribes and Pharisees Jesus talked about worked very hard to get the people back to God's law. But their way of keeping the law in fact sometimes violated the intent of the law. And the poor and outcast continued to suffer the most.

Even now those who longed for real peace...for shalom...the well-being of all...were considered unrealistic.

But there on that mountainside, people began to realize that a different way of being was possible. And they began to see two other things. First, they began to see that Jesus just might be the one God promised to send to bring in that different way of being – even though he wasn't quite what they expected.

But they also realized that they had a part to play in that way of being. They had a part to play in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus took a crowd who knew themselves as more likely cursed and revealed that they will be blessed in God's kingdom.

But Jesus' words weren't just a description of the kingdom of heaven. They were also a prescription. The good news of the kingdom not only changed thinking and vision. It changed how people acted.

As the people moved around among the crowd, they knew what it was to become salt. Their love and care for one another was the salt that flavored the whole crowd.

Starting today and through the next three Sundays we will be exploring Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Our narrative lectionary cycle runs over four years so we last worked our way through Matthew four years ago.

Then, I asked everyone to read through the entire sermon. I'm doing the same thing this year. It's three chapters – Matthew 5, 6, and 7. You can read it in your own Bible. I'll also send out a link if you prefer to read it online.

When you do, imagine yourself there. Google some pictures of the place where tradition suggests this happened. Imagine being on the side of that mountain listening to those words.

It's a challenging teaching. You will undoubtedly encounter something that challenges you. But you will also get a glimpse of Jesus' vision of God's reign that creates a world where all can thrive.

And maybe you'll come away with a sense of your own call...and our call as a community...to be salt for the earth.