

“Living As If” – January 29, 2017 – Matthew 5:1-12

When I was a child, I loved to watch the game show “Let’s Make a Deal.” My favorite part of that show was when the host would go out in to the audience and ask random people if they had some specific item. He might ask for a pair of pliers or toenail clippers, a foreign coin or a passport. These were common items, but they weren’t the type of things that everyone carries on their person at any given time. I really liked to imagine what I would carry in my purse, if I ever got the chance to be on “Let’s Make a Deal.” I would actually make a mental list of the items I would include, just so I might be prepared to win a prize.

A woman’s purse is an amazing thing. If you dig through any of our purses you’ll find out quite a bit about us. What’s important – what we think is necessary. There’s the standard stuff – cash, credit cards, maybe a check book. Pens, tissues, medicines, phones, stuff for our hair, stuff for our faces, and if we have kids, stuff for our kids. We carry around the things that we believe we might need during the day, when we’re away from our homes. We do this because we want to have some control over whatever situation might arise. And you never know when you might be a guest on “Let’s Make a Deal.”

Of course there is no way to prepare for every possible situation that might come up during the day and we would exhaust ourselves trying to be prepared for every little thing. It can be very stressful trying to get ready for every possible eventuality. Plus the more we carry around with us, the heavier the weight becomes. Sometimes I feel sorry for men who don’t normally carry around a purse or bag. But I have seen a few men with some pretty full pockets!

Now anytime we start to talk about heavy baggage, it’s easy to make the jump from the tangible to the intangible. We carry around with us more than just the physical burdens of our day to day living. Additionally we carry those emotional and spiritual burdens that can also weigh us down. And just like the material things we carry have something to say about who we are, so too do the intangible burdens. These are the things that trouble us, that cause us to be anxious.

They can be worries or doubts that we may have. They can be fears. Anxiety generally comes when we feel like we are not in control of our lives. We feel burdened when things happen that are beyond our control. These are the things that we can’t find a remedy for by digging around in our purse. Past due notices start to pile up and we wonder how we will find the resources to pay them. Our child hasn’t yet come home, and it’s two hours past the curfew. A parent has to be hospitalized and we wonder if they’ll ever make it out of the ICU. Societal ills and discord between groups of people seem to have no remedy.

We all face fears and anxieties. Each of us carries burdens. But have you ever noticed the different ways that people respond to burdens? Some people seem to wilt under the slightest load. Anxiety and stress bear down upon them, crushing them with burdens they simply cannot bear. Worry and fear seem to dominate their lives. They carry with them lots of baggage.

Then at the opposite end, there are some people who can endure life's hardships at an astonishing level. No matter how difficult or complex the situation, some folks can face it with a strength that seems impossible. When hope seems all but lost, these people face it with courage and trust. Nothing can overwhelm them; in fact, they seem to thrive under adversity. They seem to have little or no baggage.

Oftentimes we are awed by the people in this second example. We admire their faith and we see them as a model of how we wish we could be. More often many of us tend to lean toward the other end, caught up by worries, wishing we had more control over the intangibles of our lives and the world around us. We have a hard time understanding how people can seem so relaxed and calm and even undamaged by the heavy burdens they face.

I think Jesus might characterize these people as those who are living as if they were already in the kingdom of heaven. They get it. They get what Jesus was saying at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus began his ministry, he brought this message "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." After he gathered to him his disciples, he brought them up to the mountain and began to teach them what that meant.

When we hear the words "kingdom of heaven" we might get confused, thinking that Jesus is talking about the actual place – heaven – a place we won't see until after we've died. But that's not what he's saying. Kingdom of heaven is just another way of saying kingdom of God. When Jesus came to us as a human, he brought with him the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, God's ways triumph over earthly ways. This kingdom has broken through into our world, it is obviously not yet fully realized, but we see glimpses of it all around us. When we experience God's love, peace and justice, we are seeing God's realm breaking through.

When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he spoke to them where they were. These were people who were marginalized and vulnerable, some were outcasts. They were a people occupied by Rome. Life was hard, and they struggled. These weren't the mighty and wealthy and powerful people. These weren't the people calling the shots. And when Jesus began to teach them, he started out by blessing them. Where they were, in the situations they were living.

Listen again to the Beatitudes as translated by pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson from his rendition of the Bible called The Message:

¹⁻² When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:

³"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

⁴"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

⁵"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

⁶"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

⁷"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.

⁸"You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

⁹"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

¹⁰"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

¹¹⁻¹²"Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

The words that Jesus spoke to his disciples are words for us as well. He knows where we are. He understands our struggles, our anxieties, our fears. And he too offers us blessing. He tells us that no matter what situation we may find ourselves in, we can be blessed. We are blessed when we find ourselves in the darkest of shadows, in the midst of injustice, in the struggles against oppression. When we are bombarded by boundaries or engulfed by heartache, we are blessed.

How is this so? We are blessed because Almighty God, the One who formed us in our mother's womb, who created us in God's own image, who fills us with life and breath and every good thing, this God is God with us. God promises to carry each of us through the storms of life. When we are empty, God will fill us. God's love for us is unmatched by anything we can hope to imagine, and God is faithful. In the difficult times, the light of Christ will penetrate and pierce the darkness. Those moments of illumination will come, perhaps when we least expect it.

In the warmth of a friend's hand holding our own. When we accept the kindness of strangers. Standing in solidarity with those who seek peace. In the fragrance that unexpectedly reminds

you of one who is gone. In the poem, quotation or song that offers the message needed for that moment. When we let go of fear of the other. When we can accept our own faults and move beyond them. The blessings come in the ordinary and through the coincidences that occur seemingly random but surprisingly providential. And they come when we pursue the values of God and share God's love.

We will carry continue to carry our baggage around with us. But blessings come to us as gifts. Blessings offer contentment in the midst of upheaval, and unexpected joy in response to pain and sorrow. Blessings give us hope when all seems hopeless and strength when the yoke becomes too heavy for us to carry alone. Blessings remind us to live in hope and to find comfort in the promises of God that all will be well.

Julian of Norwich, a 14th century English mystic, is best known for her quote, which she said was spoken to her by God, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." She once had a vision of God holding what appeared to be a hazelnut, but then realized it was the whole created universe. In God's hand it was loved and faithfully kept. She was told in her vision, "God made it, God loves it, God keeps it." In this she was blessed. In this she found comfort and happiness in her soul. She knew that nothing could separate her from God's love. (Tentmaker.org, biography of Julian of Norwich, info compiled by Mercy Aiken)

The host on "Let's Make a Deal" wonders what's in our purse or bag? What do you carry around with you? What's important to you and what is your baggage? Are we defined by what we carry?

We are if we live in the kingdom of this world. When we strive for power, money, security, and control - those things own us and we are ruled by the fear of losing them.

But things in the kingdom of heaven are different. Maybe in the kingdom of heaven we aren't defined so much by what we carry around with us, but instead, maybe we are defined by the One who carries us. The one from whom love overflows. When we strive for mercy, seek justice, offer compassion, and work for peace - those are the things of God, and in God, love is greater than any fear.