

## **“Defined by What We Carry” – Matthew 5:1-12 – February 2, 2020**

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I have a tendency to overpack. This past week I went to Pilgrim Center for a two-day Women Clergy event. As I was gathering my things together to make the short journey, I kept having to remind myself I wasn't leaving for a week, only a couple of days. As much as I like to be prepared for any circumstance, I didn't need the entire contents of my bathroom to come with me. Who needs all that extra baggage? And for me, this is learning process about control. But I'm getting better.

Now anytime we start to talk about heavy baggage, it's easy to make the jump from the tangible to the intangible. We each carry around with us more than just the physical burdens that help us to get through our day to day existence. Additionally, we carry those emotional and spiritual burdens that can also weigh us down. 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 hits us when we feel like we are not in control of our lives. 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 or spouse 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.

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. And when Jesus began to teach them, to tell them about life in the Kingdom of Heaven, 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:

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

<sup>4</sup>"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.

<sup>5</sup>"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.

<sup>6</sup>"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.

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

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

<sup>9</sup>"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.

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

<sup>11-12</sup>"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 14<sup>th</sup> 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)

What things 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 are controlled by the things 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.