

## **Happy?!** **Matthew 5:1-12**

What makes you happy? That would seem to be an easy question to answer. A beautiful, warm, sunny day (preferably in the summer), a delicious meal, flowers on Valentine's Day. There seems to be a lot that can make us happy. So, here's another question. What makes you feel blessed? Is the list the same? In our minds they may very well be.

So why, in Scripture today, is Jesus mucking around with our heads. Matthew starts his introduction to Jesus' teaching with a bang. Blessed are...blessed are...blessed are... Nine times we hear who is blessed. The only problem with that word is that Jesus never used the word 'blessed'. He used the word 'Happy.' Happy, Happy, Happy...9 times. And that alone should be jarring because who he says is happy is not who we imagine to be happy: the poor in spirit, the mournful, the humbled, those desperate for righteousness in the world, the oppressed and persecuted. Not a group we would ever imagine to be happy.

So what gives? Where's the rub? (And there are a few.) The first and biggest issue (as always) is us – with our understanding of 'happy'. We have a very thin, cheesy, cheerful understanding of that word. And tied to that delightful understanding is all the good fortune, prosperous and satisfying benefits that give us that contented life.

But that is not what Jesus was talking about. The beatitudes, that list of blessings, used the Greek word 'makarios'. And it means something different than 'chipper.' It can be translated as 'happy' but not 'blessed' (eulogia). It means fortunate, favored, having well-being, even 'honored'. So, what is Jesus driving at when he says 'happy are...', 'fortunate are...', 'favored are...' Maybe Jesus is doing what Jesus often does – turning our world upside down and making us take a hard look at 'our happiness'. Maybe Jesus actually means to challenge all our assumptions about a 'blessed life' and who, in the long run, really has God's favor, and who is to be honored and esteemed.

Remember, in Jesus' day, as in ours, the poor, the ill, the weak and lowly were seen as 'forsaken by God'. And if you have ever been in a hard spot, in the pits of life, you know that feeling – 'where are you God; what did I ever do to you?!' And the flip side of that view still has a powerful sway on us. What makes us happy and blessed? A hot car, stately home, financial security, a body like a film star....the list goes on and on.

So is it any wonder Jesus would confront such a mindset? Jesus draws a sharp line between God and the world, just as the prophets had, ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways.’ (Isaiah 55:8) Jesus’ opening proclamation in all the gospels is ‘repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.’ And Jesus’ beatitudes can only make sense when we hear them in the context of the kingdom of God. He opens and closes his words today just that way, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven...blessed are the persecuted, the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.’ In God’s realm happiness doesn’t depend on the world’s goods or the world’s opinion. Rather God’s blessing is a gift, the gift of God’s unconditional regard, a regard, the prophets remind us leads God to care for ‘the orphaned and widowed, the stranger in your midst and the forsaken.’

When Jesus lifts up this ‘short list’ of the poor in spirit, the brokenhearted and meek, desperate for righteousness, pursuing mercy and purity, peacemakers and persecuted, he is affirming them of God’s commitment to them. And he is also reminding us, that God regularly and relentlessly shows up when and where we least expect it, and for whom we least expect it. God is present with us and blesses us with gifts the world can neither offer, nor comprehend. And we simply cannot comprehend the riches of God’s grace until we find ourselves in those desperate places where we are emptied, disillusioned and disgusted, and have enough room for God to enter, where we are needy, open and hungry for God to re-order our lives in the ways that embody the reign of God.

Maybe it is only then, when we can surrender our spirit, our life, griefs, suffering, and weaknesses to God’s love and grace that we can begin to grasp true happiness, the deep blessing that leads us to a life of blessing. Maybe as we recognize our own need for mercy, our own desire for peace and right relationships, our own brokenness and weakness, and find God’s grace for us and blessing to us, that we can then embody the happy life – the kingdom life, that welcomes the outcast, supports the weak, helps the afflicted and honors all people, because of the deep blessing and happy grace we have known in God. Amen.