



January 27, 2019

Why Jesus? Because Jesus is Blessing.  
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

### **Matthew 5:1-20 NRSV**

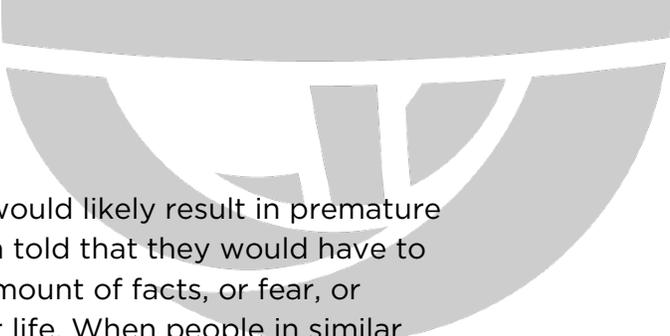
When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup>Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup>Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup>Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup>Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

<sup>13</sup>“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot. <sup>14</sup>You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

<sup>17</sup>“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. <sup>18</sup>For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup>For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

I was at a leadership conference talking about how to lead in rapidly changing times on Thursday this week in the Twin Cities. The keynote speaker told us about a book that was written several years ago called “Change or Die”. It detailed what



happened to people who had health problems that would likely result in premature death if they didn't change the way they lived. When told that they would have to change or literally die, almost no one changed. No amount of facts, or fear, or force could move them from the way they lived their life. When people in similar situations were invited to be part of a group, to practice new habits, and were given new ways to think about their situation, more people changed...But it was still only 10%.

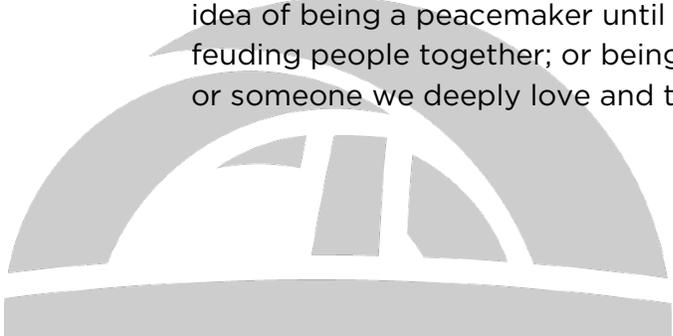
Tod Bolsinger, the keynote speaker said, foundational changes in our lives occur through embodied cognition. In other words, people are more likely to change when actions lead to changed thinking. "We can't tweak our way to a new and different future", he said. It takes a complete reframing, sometimes of who we are and what we do to live into a different kind of future. And even when we do that, only some will change.

Jesus' sermon on the mount is that kind of radical reframing of who we are and what we do to live into the future God envisions for the world. Jesus casts a vision that turns our conventional wisdom about what it means to be blessed on its head.

When we look closely at how people commonly talk about blessing it sounds a little like God is a genie in a bottle, granting us what we need or want in order to be comfortable. We're blessed if we have a nice house, a good job, children who succeed in life, or enough money to do some fun things like go on vacation or have a second home. Certainly, God has a hand in providing all we need for daily life. Don't get me wrong. But this common understanding of blessing has the danger of seeing God as one who prefers people with material prosperity, over the vast majority of the world who don't.

Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount points to a very different definition of blessing. Rather than focus on the things people may or may not have, Jesus blessing speaks to the awareness of God in our lives in all circumstances. Jesus calls us to critique how God's blessings are distributed across the human family and to radically reexamine where God's loyalties seem to be. Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Let's be honest though, few of us aspire to be blessed the way Jesus blesses. It may be good *if we happen* to find ourselves in a situation where we are mourning or feel poor in spirit, that God's grace meets us in that moment. We may like the idea of being a peacemaker until we engage in the demanding task of bringing feuding people together; or being merciful until we face one who has wounded us or someone we deeply love and try to let go of the hurt in order to offer mercy.





No, we may not find much blessing in Jesus' words at first glance. But if we are seeking God, if we hope to align our lives with God's mercy and grace, there is good news in this radically different way of blessing. Because whether you live in a big house or a tiny apartment, or your kids are on the honor roll or they're in juvenile detention does not determine how blessed you are. It's not about our connection to our things or even our own accomplishments. Rather, each of Jesus' blessings call us to examine how connected and committed we are to God's vision for the world. Jesus calls it the kingdom of heaven, where we participate with God in bringing about justice, where the merciful and those who seek the welfare of all are recognized, and those who strive to build what Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community see God.

Now friends, I want to pause here to make it plain that blessing, the way Jesus sees it, is not reward for our labors, but it is what happens when we claim our identity as God's people and align our lives with God's purposes. Jesus' blessing comes in the journey of faith, in the struggle for God's abundant grace to be accessible to all, and in the daily tasks of loving those whom Jesus loves. I know this is not easy. It takes determination and a willingness to hold on to a vision for the world that most of us only understand some of the time. More often, forces work against God's vision by using fear, fiction, or force to keep us from trusting that God's love, God's care, God's blessing can extend further than we can imagine. And we're not immune to these forces. We give into sin. We lose sight of the vision. We find the work too overwhelming.

But imagine how different the world would be if Thomas Jefferson would not have cast a bold vision for America when he wrote in the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among them are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Ironic that he wrote them, given that he was a slave owner. But these words set in motion a deep-seeded hope by many in our nation to seek justice and equality for all - they had a roll in Lincoln's decision to set slaves free in the Emancipation Proclamation nearly a hundred years later. A hundred years after that, Martin Luther King, Jr caught God's vision for Jesus; blessings to be shared and Jefferson's words to be embodied, as he inspired a new generation of people to take up the struggle for people of all colors and creeds to be brothers and sisters in one beloved community, not adversaries and strangers to one another.



We are part of a region that is growing and changing rapidly because a group of people had a vision for Rochester to be a Destination Medical Center. With it comes some tremendous opportunities. New residents and talent in our



community. New restaurants and entertainment venues. Additional medical innovation and capacity to change the lives of very sick people. A vision like this also brings some significant challenges. There is not enough affordable housing yet for the workers needed to build this vision, not enough daycare spaces yet for children, not enough decent affordable housing yet for seniors who are coming to be closer to family and high-quality medical care. Whether we are enthusiastic about the changes or not, they are happening. The question is how we as a church, in the heart of all this change, serve as a witness to God's activity, and God's blessing during all the change to our community? What might it look like for us to commit ourselves to the people Jesus blesses at this time in this place? What kind of vision do we have for our presence in the neighborhood as we welcome hundreds of new people living here? How can our building serve as a place of blessing for those who need it most, and a community for those who also seek to align their lives with God?

One of our initiatives that you made possible this year is an event to gather our neighbors for a block party. I envision our congregation welcoming residents of the new apartments, students from Luther and UMR, Open Table guests and others to be together and catch a glimpse of what it looks like to be Jesus' blessed community - a community that embraces all and calls us to pay attention to the movement of God among us.

We may not start a national movement, but Jesus calls us to build his kingdom wherever we are, with whomever we can. And as we do this work together, we discover that our blessings are not found in what we have, but in whose we are. Why Jesus? Because Jesus is blessing. Amen.

