

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
22 January 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Third Sunday after Epiphany

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Blessed is the Church”

Third Sermon in Series, *Pace & Practice* (Annual Theme: “Spirit of Curiosity”)

Matthew 5:1-20

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide, but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

“Oh, everything matters if anything matters at all. Everything matters – no matter how big, no matter how small. Oh, God believes in you. God believes in you.”¹

Singer songwriter Pierce Pettis sums up the essence of the Beatitudes with that simple phrase – *God believes in you.*

God believes in *every part* of you – not just the parts of you that are put together, pretty, or productive – but the parts of you that are persecuted, the parts that mourn, hunger, thirst, struggle, and suffer. And unlike the world that rewards us for being proud, vengeful, and violent – God believes in and blesses our humility, our mercy, and our peacemaking.

You see, the Beatitudes – the “blessed are” statements in Matthew – they’re statements that name reality as it is in the

Kin-dom of God, which is NOT how reality is in the here and now – *except* for in those moments when we, the people of God (the Church), believe this reality to be possible and act as if it is.

In Matthew 5, Jesus is having a “moment” with his disciples. Up to this point in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has been born, baptized, and banished to the wilderness. He’s survived being tempted by the devil and he’s been grieving his cousin’s arrest. He’s begun calling his disciples, healing the sick, and teaching in the synagogues and country sides (Matthew 4:18-25). He’s got a following now – crowds of people hungering to see him, hear him, and touch him.

As Jesus’ practice of ministry has picked up, so has his pace of life and on this particular day – Jesus sees all the people

¹ Pierce Pettis, “God Believes in You,” *Everything Matters* (c. 1998, Compass Records).

clamoring after him and puts on one of those t-shirts that says – “I can’t PEOPLE today” and he tries to slow his pace. He goes up on to mountaintop, which is really just a raised hill (I just don’t want you envision him scrambling up a Rocky Mountain¹⁴-er or anything) – Jesus goes up a hillside and sits down. He gets one deep breath in before he sees his disciples all around him. The crowds are at a distance now, but still within earshot. And he knows. Alas, this is not gonna be a personal meditative moment; it’s gonna be a public, teaching moment.

And remember, we are in Matthew’s gospel, which is written to a primarily Jewish audience. So we can’t read about the Messiah on a ‘mountain’ without thinking of Moses on Mt. Sinai and what a monumental moment that was for God’s people. So too, is this moment – when Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount.

Just as God ushered in a new era for God’s people with the giving of the Law through Moses, God is ushering in a new era for God’s people through the teaching of Jesus² – the One who says, *“Do not think that I*

have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill,” (Matthew 5:17).

Often when we hear this verse we think of the Law not just as 10 the commandments, but the entire 613 *mitzvots* (commandments) in the Old Testament. And we recall what Jesus will tell the Sadducees and Pharisees (Jewish scholars and teachers, experts in the law) in Matthew 22:37-40: *“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

For whatever reason, we tend to focus on the Law part of Jesus, and not the Prophetic part. Probably because it’s a lot more warm and fuzzy to think about Loving God and Loving neighbor in an abstract, good intentioned kind of way – but it’s a lot harder to think of the critical and self-evaluating words of the prophets – who point out – without any sugar-coating – the ways that we are

² Kevin Ruffcorn, “Matthew 5:1-20, Sermon on the Mount,” *A Sane Faith* (15 Jan. 2023), accessed on

January 22, 2023 at <https://asanefait.com/matthew-51-20-sermon-on-the-mount/>.

failing to actually Love God and Love Others by neglecting the poor, not feeding the hungry, not releasing the captive or restoring sight to the blind.

When Jesus says he is fulfilling the Prophets as well as the Law, he means he is as serious about the Liberation of all God's people as he is about Loving all God's people. Jesus is embodying – in his very self and teaching – a message and reality that requires upending the world as it is – to bring about the Kingdom of God as it shall be. This is a radically challenging message. The prophetic side of faith shows just what it takes to live into the laws of love of our faith.

And this is where the Beatitudes come in. Because they are a kind of “vision statement” for the church; they “*turn the world's values upside down. What is true for those who live in the power of the kingdom of heaven is a flat reversal of what is considered to be true in the culture at large.*”³

The world would say:

“Blessed are the rich, in things and in self-assurance.
Blessed are those untouched by loss.
Blessed are the powerful.
Blessed are those who are ‘realistic’ about righteousness – compromising at every turn.
Blessed are those who demand and exact an eye for an eye.
Blessed are the crafty and the opportunistic.
Blessed are those bold enough to make war.
Blessed are those who, doing good things, receive many accolades.
Blessed are those who, following Jesus, are widely praised and adored.”⁴

These statements make sense in the logic of our world. But Jesus is saying, “*No. That is not how the world actually works, no matter how things may seem.*”⁵ It doesn't have to be this way, and it wasn't designed to be this way. Just as God – the Creator and Designer.

And it's also important for us to realize that the Beatitudes are not an ethical code – they are not statements that tell us – *if* we do this *then* we will be righteous enough and this will

³ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 1997, 47.

⁴ Matthew Myer Boulton, “Matthew 5:1-12: Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word: Matthew Volume 1*,

Chapters 1-13, eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis & E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2013, 76.

⁵ Boulton, 76, 78.

happen. No, the Beatitudes, as a vision statement for who we are as God's people, are a gift. For they function as divine blessing and a reminder of how we can bring about that blessing... The verbs are in the present tense "for they will be" – showing us that the blessing is in the opportunity to work for the kingdom of God, not just in the experiencing of the final fruits of the kin-dom of God.⁶

The word "blessed" is *makarios* in the Greek. It is more simply translated as "happy," and more accurately translated in the New Testament as "the state of one who has become a partaker of God; to experience the fullness of God."⁷

Blessed does not describe a state one has achieved by external circumstances or markers, but it is an internal state one cultivates through attitude and disposition and seeing oneself as one with God and God's vision for the world. In other words, we do not receive a blessing from God if we live as poor, mourning, meek, righteous, merciful, pure, peace-making, persecuted people. These are not actions to check off on our spiritual check-

list to achieve divine approval. No, the beatitudes describe an internal state of our heart – no matter our circumstances – as we live and espouse the values of God's kin-dom. Everything in the world tells us we are "blessed" if we make a lot of money and never suffer. But the truth is – you can make a lot of money and feel empty. And the truth is – everyone suffers and our suffering has nothing to do with your righteousness or standing before God.

What the beatitudes teach us is the internal fortitude and strength we need to see ourselves as God's beloveds and act from that place of love and joy and hope – no matter what is happening in our lives or in the world. To hold fast to how God calls us to live in the world – even when it's hard and uncomfortable and seems like the struggle will never end.

"The Beatitudes describe the traits of the citizenry of the kingdom of heaven,"⁸ which is to say – Jesus is describing what it looks like for the people of God to live as the people of God. And the implications are clear: "the church, the

⁶ Boulton, 78.

⁷ Accessed on January 22, 2023 at <https://www.studylight.org/language-studies/greek-thoughts.html?article=38>.

⁸ Long, 47.

community of Christ, is to be a joyful people...But the source of our joy is not that we live easy lives in a happy world, or that things are getting better every day, but that our trust is in God's coming kin-dom"⁹ and our ability to bring that about.

For the world, the kingdom is just a future hope; for the church, the kingdom must be a present reality and a future hope.¹⁰ And *we make it a present reality* by believing that what Jesus teaches us about this kin-dom is true and living as if it IS true.

And this is where Jesus shifts from teaching in individual statements that guide our internal hearts and motivations to giving us metaphors that describe our collective influence and impact.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is THE sermon we all need to hear right now. Because while the world is telling us the church is dying and losing relevance and significance, Jesus reminds us

that nothing can kill the Spirit of God and the dream of God's kin-dom. Which means that nothing can kill the Church, for the Spirit of God will always be alive. The question is: will we allow it to transform us and work *through us* to transform the world?

The statistics about the Church Today are staggering and sobering.¹¹ "For the first time in modern history, more Americans reported they are not members of a community of faith than are"¹²...and "only 9% of Americans attend church every week."¹³ The Church was already struggling, but now the COVID-19 pandemic has caused such significant disruption to American religious life that it is rapidly accelerating the ongoing downward trends in people who attend religious services. Before the pandemic, 75% of Americans reported attending religious services at least once a year. By Spring 2022, roughly 66% of the public reported attending religious services at least once a year.

⁹ Long, 47.

¹⁰ Long, 47-48.

¹¹ Jennifer Benz, Lindsey Witt-Swanson, and Daniel A. Cox, "Faith After the Pandemic: How COVID-19 Changed American Religion." *Survey Center on American Life* (January 2023), accessed on January 21, 2023 at <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Faith-After-the-Pandemic.pdf?x91208>.

¹² Bill Leonard, "America 2021: Got church and steeple but where are the people?" *Baptist News Global* (14 April 2021), accessed on January 21, 2023 at <https://baptistnews.com/article/america-2021-got-church-and-steeple-but-where-are-the-people/#.YWjlk2ZKjwM>.

¹³ Jeffrey M. Jones, "In U.S., Childhood Churchgoing Habits Fade in Adulthood," *Gallup* (21 Dec. 2022), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/467354/childhood-churchgoing-habits-fade-adulthood.aspx>.

Nearly every major religious tradition has experienced a drop in worship attendance.¹⁴

A March 2022 Pew Research Center survey¹⁵ nuances this data to include online worship attendance and they discovered that among all adults who say they typically attend services at least monthly, 36% have both attended in person *and* watched services digitally in the last month, while 31% say they have *only attended in person* but not watched online in the last month. 21% may still be substituting virtual attendance for in-person attendance, saying they recently have watched religious services online but have not attended in person.¹⁶

Commenting on these changing realities of church life, Baptist historian Bill Leonard shared: “My pastor friend offered this anecdote: A few weeks after the worship streaming in their church, a church leader contacted him to say, ‘Pastor, I just love sitting at our kitchen

table on Sunday morning, listening to your sermons. It is a real blessing.’ Assessing that remark, the pastor told me, ‘Reverend, he ain’t ever coming back.’ He didn’t mean that the good church member had completely checked out; he’d simply discovered a new Sunday church option. [Not better or worse, but definitely different.]

[It naturally follows that churches will be] uncertain as to how best to respond to the multiple realities that are re-forming church life in the U.S.’¹⁷ It will take time.

Offering a words of hope Leonard writes, “*Discouraged with all this re-formation (and what it means for the church today)? Just remember Paul and Barnabas in Acts 16 when the earthquake opened the prison and the jailer thought they’d all escaped: “But Paul shouted in a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all still here.’” That’s the gospel [today] too.’¹⁸ We are still here.*

¹⁴ Jeff Brumley, “Young adults and those who attended church infrequently before pandemic are most likely to be missing from church today,” *Baptist News Global* (12 January 2023), accessed on January 21, 2023 at <https://baptistnews.com/article/young-adults-and-those-who-attended-church-infrequently-before-pandemic-are-most-likely-to-be-missing-from-church-today/>.

¹⁵ Justin Nortey, “More houses of worship are returning to normal operations, but in-person attendance is unchanged since fall,” *Pew Research Center* (22 March 2022), accessed on January 21, 2023 at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact->

[tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall/).

¹⁶ Nortey, *ibid*.

¹⁷ Bill Leonard, “‘Reverend, they ain’t ever coming back’: Confronting churchly realities 2022,” *Baptist News Global* (15 September 2022), accessed on January 21, 2023 at <https://baptistnews.com/article/reverend-they-aint-ever-coming-back-confronting-churchly-realities-2022/>.

¹⁸ Leonard, “‘Reverend,” *ibid*.

In person in the pews. Or online.
Or both.

Indeed, how Jesus views the Church – that is to say, those who follow in his Way – is quite different than how Gallup, the Pew Research Center, and religious historians. For Jesus, who was never alive during any kind of organized ‘church’ movement, following him and being his disciple was about bringing about the Kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

It was about being Salt and Light. These metaphors should be incredibly encouraging to us as the Church. Just *a little bit* of salt, just a pinch, flavors an entire dish. The smallest amount makes a difference and is of great value. And likewise, just a little bit of light, a single candle flame or beam of a flashlight or a glow of a lamp, can illumine a dark space.

Jesus reminds us in this Sermon that the goal of our life as the Church, as his followers, is NOT to be measured by the world’s metrics and standards, but to be beneficial, useful, life-giving elements in the world and to the world. Jesus does not talk about worship size or people in the pews. In fact, in the early church, in this new

movement of followers of Jesus – the disciples and apostles did not know how many people were following Jesus – or even as house churches began to get started – how many churches there were and how many people were cramming into those houses. There were no Instagram images marked #churchgrowth or #greatattendance. No Facebook announcements about what programs were happening. No Twitter feeds about who was preaching and what they said.

Yes, we love coming to this place on Sunday morning and worshipping – in person or online – but what matters is not the metrics of Sunday morning – but what happens on Monday morning at Bootstraps and Blessings as we give a pinch of salt to those who need dignity and rest and warmth in their life. A place for people to take a shower, do their laundry, have a bite to eat, be seen, and heard. What matters is what happens on Friday morning at Stedman Elementary when we show up to read with 3rd graders, lighting flames of learning and connection with students who need someone to see them as they are that day, not as who they were yesterday or who they need to be tomorrow.

A key way for us to survive these times is for us to reclaim and recommit to our vision statement of the Beatitudes. We must be Salt & Light – and the Good News is – we can be Salt and Light. And we are!

Calvary, we may not look like we did 3 years ago or 30 years ago, and who knows what we'll look like in 3 months, but when we hear Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – I can't help but think that we, the Church, are blessed.

We are struggling, we are suffering, we are changing, we are adapting, we are mourning – and we are blessed. Who we are today – right now in this moment is enough. Jesus is calling us to not only feel the joy and fullness of God's self within us, but to flavor the world with our gifts...to shine as a bright light through all the circumstances that are dimming and darkening.

The Good News of Jesus' sermon is that it does not take a LOT – a lot of people, a lot of money, a lot of programs, a lot of success – to be successful as servants as the Kin-dom. It just takes us. Us. You and Me. Calvary. As we are Today. Not who we were Yesterday. Not as

we Will be or Might be or Hope to be Tomorrow. But Who We are TODAY. In *this* moment in time.

What makes us, Calvary, taste like the Kin-dom of God to the world? How do we Shine as a Light of God's justice in the world?

If it takes just a pinch of salt to flavor a whole dish, then it follows that if we have just a pinch of people in our pews or worshipping online – then we have a church. And with whoever is here in our midst – if we shine the Light we have to shine – and do not hide out in fear about whether we'll survive OR embarrassment about having lower numbers OR anxiety about whether we'll make the budget – then we will Light up the World.

We are flavoring. And we are shining, Calvary.

And if we had any doubts about our individual influence or collective impact – I hope the last 10 days have shown us all that we are not dying, we are not even surviving, we are *thriving*.

The world says the church is dying, and look at us – we pulled together – 122

individuals and families – and raised \$163,866 dollars in 10 days.¹⁹ Why? Because we believe in the mission and vision of God’s kin-dom and because God is clearly at work within us and stirring among us. We would not have met this goal if that was not the case.

Life is hard right now. Inflation is high. Economic uncertainty is all around. You have many ways you can spend your money. But we gave because we believe that Church matters. Not because we’re the best church or the only church, but because *this* is the place where we come to know we belong to God. This is the place where we are cared for and where we can care for others. This is the place where our doubt is welcome and our faith grows. This is the place where we sing praise and cry out in lament. This is the place through which we serve others and allow ourselves to be served.

This is a community called Calvary that is *Open to All, Closed to None*, and WE are *Christ’s Church*. We do not always get it right. We persecute and at times, feel persecuted.

We mourn (a lot). We are not always poor in spirit or merciful. Our hearts and intentions are not always pure, and we do not always make peace. Sometimes we act more righteous than we thirst for righteousness. Yet even still – we believe the kin-dom of heaven is ours – both now and in the future – and that belief is what gives us joy. Not the circumstances of our lives, but the promise and presence of God’s love, hope, justice, and peace. And we believe this to be true not because of what we do on our own by ourselves, but because of what God does in and through us – collectively.

So – yes, Blessed is the Church.

Blessed is the Church who is navigating the realities of Hybrid Worship, for our sharing of God’s love will reach further and farther than we could ever imagine.

Blessed is the Church who mourns the people they have lost in the last few years, for we will be strengthened and inspired by those saints.

¹⁹ This references a Miracle Match Giving Campaign that ran from January 13-January 22, concluding this Sunday. Calvary exceeded its goal of \$75,000, which a

donor had pledged to match dollar for dollar to help us close our budget gap.

Blessed is the Church who has fewer people in the pews, for that offers opportunity to invite even more people to worship and it reveals that our impact is not limited to attendance on Sunday but on acting as the Body of Christ Monday through Saturday.

Blessed is the Church who is full of people who are tired and weary, for we will uplift and strengthen one another and develop resilience.

Blessed is the Church who has campers gaining warmth around their building, for we will see God in and through their eyes.

Blessed is the Church who hurts at injustice and courageously confronts its own racism, sexism, ablism, xenophobia, and homophobia, for we will see how power and privilege continue persecution...and we will say, “no more.”

Blessed is the Church who forgives each other when we disagree, for we will experience mercy (and humility!)

Blessed is the Church who is Open to All for as All walk

through their doors, we will sometimes miss the mark and learn how much more welcoming we can become.

Blessed is the Church who is Closed to None, for in accepting diversities of thought and experience – we catch a fuller glimpse of God’s image.

Blessed is the Church who is impacted by inflation and economic uncertainty and financial scarcity, for we will yet even still celebrate and experience abundance through generosity.

Blessed is the Church who has budget gaps, for we will be called to create M-I-R-A-C-L-E-S.²⁰

Blessed is the Church, Calvary. For we are called to be Salt and Light for the world. And we have all we need to Flavor Fully and Shine Brightly.

It does not take much. It just takes us. A pinch of people...a flickering flame...a Church who will not be extinguished. And a Church in whom God believes.

Amen.

²⁰ This also references our MIRALCE MATCH campaign, and the giant helium balloons in the sanctuary on this Sunday that spelled out Miracle.