



“A New Way”

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

There is nothing particularly easy or simple or even quick to explain about the passage from Matthew’s Gospel that is before us this morning. For those of us who have been around the church for awhile, the words have familiarity. We’ve traveled this road before.

And we use them as a source of comfort, but we don’t know why. They challenge credulity.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

If that doesn’t sound like “pie in the sky,” what does? And those translations that offer us the word “happy” are just plain wrong. The Greek word doesn’t translate as “happy.” It only makes the matter worse.

“Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

“Happy are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

“Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

When I'm brokenhearted and in the depths of despair and brokenness, I'm supposed to be happy? When I am in the pain of grief and the rawness of loss, I'm supposed to be happy? When I feel like I am the world's doormat and have no power or influence over my own existence, I'm supposed to be happy? When I just want things to be fair and just in a world that rejects both ideas as a sign of weakness, I'm supposed to be happy?

Little wonder people walk away wanting nothing to do with this whole Jesus business.

But, what if there was a different way to look at these words? The word we translate, "blessed," is a tricky word in Greek. But "blessed" is probably the best word we can use.

"Blessed" doesn't mean someday - it means right now - present tense. The blessing is not for some unknown future - someday when "we all get to heaven." That would be cruel comfort.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit" - "blessed are they in their poverty" - "blessed are they in their distress" - for they are part of God's kingdom and God is with them.

"Blessed are those who mourn" - "blessed are those who are enveloped in grief" - "blessed are those who have no idea how they will get through the current moment" - "blessed are those who have no idea when a paycheck is coming their way" - for they are a part of God's kingdom and God is with them.

"Blessed are the meek" - "blessed are the downtrodden and the humble" - "blessed are they who walk the earth gently and practice kindness and compassion" - for they are a part of God's kingdom and God is with them.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" - "blessed are those who do what God requires" - "blessed are those in profound need" - for they are a part of God's kingdom and God is with them.

Whatever the situation in which we find ourselves, no matter how broken we feel, no matter how fractured our life may seem to be - we are a part of God's kingdom and God is with us. No matter how poor we are, no matter the depth of our struggle, no matter our frustration and disappointment - we are a part of God's kingdom and God is with us. Jesus reminds us that we are not alone - that God is with us. There's the good news!

The next set of the Beatitudes moves to a different area of life and living.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

These short sayings remind us that the life of God’s people is a life that differs dramatically from the world around them.

To those who are poor in spirit, constricted in poverty, weighed down with distress and worry - God’s people are called to be agents of mercy and sources of compassion - reflecting the very mercy of God - embodying God’s goodness.

To be God’s people, we are called to be wholly devoted to the way of God. This is what it means to be “pure in heart.” It is to face the choice between God and mammon and choose God’s way. It is to put away the way of hatred and division and live the life of love and unity.

To be God’s people, we are challenged to work for peace - bringing reconciliation between hostile individuals, families, groups, and nations. We are called to be ambassadors for God’s peace and not catechumens of chaos.

To be God’s people, we are called to stand boldly and fastidiously as God’s people, in the fullness of the Gospel, and refuse to compromise and cooperate with those who urge us to abandon that way. We are called to live out our faith and not simply internalize it as a good philosophy. We are called to bring the blessing.

If we can live this way - individually and together - then we become the salt and light that Jesus speaks of. We bring spice to the blandness of the world’s way. We bring light to those in the shadowlands of the world around us.

Jesus is calling us to a revolutionary new way of life. It is a way the world neither understands nor values. It is a way of compassion, understanding, cooperation, peace, and presence. It is a new way - even after two thousand years.

When I was a boy, we would sometimes travel to Presque Isle, up in Erie, Pennsylvania. On Presque Isle is a lighthouse. Its purpose was simple: to serve as a beacon to the ships out on Lake Erie, guiding them away from danger and into the safety of the harbor.

You’ve seen lighthouses like that in lots of places. Many are disappearing, but some are as critical to maritime safety today as they were a hundred years ago. The light brings life.

I don’t know if Jesus ever saw a lighthouse. Probably not. But the image is still the same. When you and I live as part of God’s kingdom - when you and I experience God’s presence with us in every aspect of life - when you and I can be the presence of God for another - the light shines and guides people to safety and wholeness.

In a special way, as we ordain and install new leaders to service in our congregation, they are taking on that work in a profound and powerful way. Pray for them. Encourage them. Support them.

Together, let us walk the new way - the blessed way - and let us share the saltiness and light of life with the world around us. For now and evermore. Amen.



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