

Matthew 5:1-12

“Read the Instructions”

Methodist Minister James Moore tells the story about getting a play set for his children. They had been begging for one, complete with slide, swings and a fort on top. After searching the catalogs, he and his wife made a decision and ordered one. It was delivered in a huge box with those three words that parents dread stamped on it. **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.**

Rev. Moore said he had been struggling for about three hours, while his children sat patiently, thinking that just ANY minute they could begin their play. He had all the pieces spread out in the yard, tools that he thought would be useful and would put one part together and sometimes disassemble it while his children looked on. Suddenly, his three-year-old pulled a bright pink piece of paper out of the box and said, “Look Daddy” and handed it to him. In bold letters it said, “**BEFORE ASSEMBLING, READ THE INSTRUCTIONS**”.

Perhaps that is why God gave us the written word. And while ALL of Scripture can be seen as directions, some instructions are more succinct than others. They keep us from having to guess what God’s intentions are. These passages include the Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Another would be The Ten Commandments, as well as The Golden Rule. “Do unto others as you would have done to you.” And of course, the Beatitudes that we just heard from Matthew’s Gospel.

These nine blessings, the beginning of one of Jesus Christ’s most famous sermons, known as the Sermon on the Mount, were suggested today as the passage from our Common Lectionary. I studied them before I left for vacation, consulting all the commentaries, as I

usually do. But quite honestly, I didn't discover anything new. The books I consulted were filled with things that I have already told you.

For example, Matthew's Gospel was written specifically for the Jews to help them believe that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Messianic Promise. Therefore, he draws several parallels between Jesus and Moses, the "savior", as it were, of the Hebrews. So just as Moses had most of his important encounters with God on the top of various mountains, so does Matthew's Jesus. Therefore, I won't tell you that.

I also will not tell you that, in Jesus' day, Jewish men were disciples of a certain Rabbi. The Rabbis did most of their teaching and debated the Law while walking around and their disciples followed them from place to place. So in like fashion, disciples of Jesus followed him from place to place while he healed, shared his wisdom and taught with parables. Therefore, when Jesus SAT DOWN, as Matthew tells us Jesus did here, the people knew that something very significant was going to be shared. I am sure you already know that so I don't need to tell you again.

I also will not tell you that the Beatitudes were ideas that turned the people's expectations of the world upside down. Rather than rewarding the strong, the wealthy, the popular, God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the justice seekers and those persecuted for their beliefs. This seemed incongruent to the Jews who expected a Messiah of power and might to lead them after hundreds of years of oppressed living.

And since I am not going to repeat these things, I found myself at a loss of what to tell you that might be new. On top of that, it is my personal belief that each Beatitude or blessing deserves a sermon of its own. So what's a preacher to say? Well, let me share with you how the Lord provides.

Before we left for vacation, a friend asked me how well I knew the people who owned the sailboat where we would spend a week together. I told her we were only casual friends and, while we usually would choose to live in 43 feet of space for a week with people we knew well, we were giving it a try. The person even asked if the boat owners were Christians, and I admitted that I had no idea.

The first day that we arrived on the boat, I told our friends that we had a 6 hour wait in the Miami airport and I had worked on my sermon during that time and hoped to be able to leave work all behind me. Suzanne, our hostess, asked me which passage I had been studying and I told her “The Beatitudes” and she exclaimed, “That’s my favorite”. During the week, I learned that she is a committed Christian, very involved in her church where she teaches Bible Study to Senior High girls, among other things. AND that she had chosen this very passage to teach these girls just last year!

So as the week drew to a close, I asked if I could pick her brain. I thought it might be good to get a lay person’s perspective instead of just hearing what other ministers thought through the commentaries. She started by saying, “I really think you have to consider the whole passage and not each blessing separately.” Wow! The Lord does provide.

She shared many thoughts but this ONE really said it all to me. Her words were, “The Beatitudes keep me focused on who I am in Christ.” What a beautiful summary. When I asked her why she had chosen this passage for teenage girls she said, “Well, these girls often already feel broken. They are confronted with peer pressure, the world’s expectations of what beauty is, of how they should feel and what they should do. The Beatitudes help them feel hope.” And friends, this is true for Christians of every age.

The first three blessings are written for those who are living in the margins. Those whose spirits have been broken by society, the mourners, the humble. And while I remember often feeling like such an outsider in my teenage years, don't we ALL feel excluded, broken or grief-filled at some time in our lives? These three verses show that God is with those who live in the underbelly of social, religious, political and economic structures.

So whether we feel excluded because we do not have clothes from the store where our peers bought theirs or because we do not know where our next meal is coming from, we can have hope that when we have been beaten down by the world, it is not the end of the story.

Of course, those of us who are in a better place right now are called to extend God's favor as it has been given to us. To pay it forward, so to speak. Souper Bowl Sunday is a perfect example of this. And I mean S-O-U-P-E-R.

Did you know that this event was started in 1990 at Spring Valley Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC? It began as a vision to mobilize young people to fight hunger and poverty in their communities by transforming the Big Game into a time to raise money for local charities. In the past thirty years, over \$143 million and \$9 million in food donations have been collected.

The Souper Bowl of Caring has gained national attention, securing partnerships with NFL Teams, in addition to finding National Advocates in former President and Mrs. George H.W. Bush and former President and Mrs. Jimmy Carter. 100% of all the money and food is given directly to local charities of the group's choice.

After worship today, we will be blessed as a congregation to share a meal of soup together. We will also have the opportunity to bring these words of blessing to those on the margins of life in our community. Our youth will also be standing at the doors after worship, as

well as during our lunch, to collect your offering for the Souper Bowl of Caring. They have chosen to send our donations this year to the Middle Tyger Community Food Bank.

The next verses in the Beatitudes are practices that embody hope for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and the promise of eschatological rewards. That means, for the Kingdom of Heaven that we will all one day join because of our belief in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The suggested Old Testament passage to preach from WITH the Beatitudes are the same words I chose to use as a charge for our newly ordained and installed Elders from Micah 6:8. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

These words can be used to remind us all that the fruits of the kingdom in the world to come can come about by our partnership in ministry WITH God. Indeed, when we as individuals and as a body of Christ practice the words that are given to us each day, then God’s promised transformation is birthed again and again.

Finally, the last verses found in the Beatitudes calls us as disciples to live out the virtues of the blessings as we pursue righteousness that is grounded in God’s righteousness. In other words, the beatitudes are not kept as a way of ensuring our entrance into Heaven. That is given to us solely by God’s grace. Yet, they can be seen as God’s command to us to share steadfast love, mercy, justice and goodness because God first loved us, in Jesus Christ, and provided for our salvation.

In addition to our focus on the Souper Bowl of Caring, the Beatitudes can be a strong tool for each individual part of the Body of Christ here at Nazareth in our pursuit to make 2020 “The Year of the Child.” This can be done as we teach them to our children by our actions more than

our words. The Beatitudes call us to respond positively to those who live out the virtues of meekness, of seeking righteousness, of being willing to fill our souls with God more than filling our bellies with things we may not need. In doing this, we teach ALL of God's children to live in a way that exemplifies God's qualities.

All in all, this beautiful sermon from our Lord Jesus Christ calls each of us to a general vision of faithful living. My friend actually said, "The Beatitudes help me hunger and thirst for righteousness by praying that God's will never wanes in me and so that I will always seek to be pure in heart". Her words are a blessing to me and a reminder that Jesus Christ calls us all to take HIS words to heart so that the Kingdom of God can become our reality. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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