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Pilgrim United Church of Christ
Fourth Sunday After Epiphany
January 29, 2017

Scripture readings: [Micah 6:1-8](#) and [Matthew 5:1-12](#)

How many of you are originally from outside of North Carolina? That's what I thought. Look at all these refugees! We're already a sanctuary church opening our doors to the northern exiles among us, welcoming the strangers who make fun of our inability to drive in snow.

Those of us who grew up in the South, or who love *Steel Magnolias*, are familiar with phrases like *I'm just piddlin'... fixin' to go to the Piggly Wiggly... if the creek don't rise... well, she was madder than a wet hen... you're slower than molasses, bless your heart.*

My mom, *God love her*, is particularly fond of blessing people's hearts. She's a regular miracle worker. But she often means "bless your heart" more sincerely than it's typically used. The way you can tell if someone really means it or is saying it as an addendum to an insult is how quickly they speak. Did you northern transplants know that?

If it's being used sarcastically, it's usually spoken more quickly: "She's dumber than a box of rocks, *bless her heart.*" If it's being used sincerely, it's spoken much more emphatically and with even more syllables than a Southerner would typically use: "Carolina lost by 15 to Miami? **Bless their hearts.**" My mom is never facetious about UNC.

While I was sitting with Matthew's account of Jesus' sermon on the mount this week, I imagined it translated into the New Revised Southern Version:

Bless their hearts, the mourners will be comforted.

Bless their hearts, the merciful will receive mercy.

People say all kinds of horrible, evil, ugly things about you, bless your heart.

I don't think Jesus is being trite or flippant when he proclaims these blessings, but I will admit, as someone who has heard and read and repeated them countless times, at the end of this scene -- and at the end of this week -- I still wonder, "*What do they mean?*"

In Matthew's account, the Sermon on the Mount happens early in Jesus' ministry. He has just called a few fisherfolk to follow him, and begun going throughout Galilee teaching and healing all kinds of illness and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. Great crowds began following him from Galilee, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.

Our text tells us, "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain..."

I love that line and image: introvert Jesus seeking some space.

[Luke's account of the Sermon on the Mount](#) is very different: Jesus comes *down* the mountain and stands "on a level place -- with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all over Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast."

Luke's picture shows a large crowd listening to Jesus. Matthew's seems to reveal a smaller gathering: only Jesus' disciples are specifically mentioned. But who knows, maybe the multitude caught up with them and Matthew's fake news failed to mention it. #alternativefacts

In Matthew's gospel, the Sermon on the Mount is the first speech of Jesus' ministry. It is the first and longest of the discourses recorded in Matthew. That solidifies the significance, at least to this writer, of Jesus' layered litany of blessing.

It's hard for most of us to hear Jesus' words well because of our cultural (mis)understanding of blessing, and what it means to be blessed. We are inundated with the interpretation that to be blessed means to be favored in clearly perceivable, often tangible ways. We conflate blessing with privilege.

And the continuation of that logic is that those in need, those without, those who are struggling are *not* blessed, *not* favored by God. In fact, some in our

society -- too many of our leaders, in fact -- demean and further marginalize those who lack the perceived ideal:

those seeking sanctuary in our country are suspect;
those without adequate income are lazy;
those working lower earning jobs are stupid;
those with darker skin tones are criminal;
those without a Y chromosome need male guardians for their bodies;
those in the LGBTQ community are deviant sinners...

To that, Jesus says, “No. *Blessed* are they...”

To deny that is to question the credibility of the gospel -- the *good* news.

Minister, writer, and artist Jan Richardson remembers that the first time we hear the word “blessed” in the story of Jesus comes when his mom’s relative, Elizabeth, encounters Mary, who is pregnant with Jesus, and repeatedly calls her “blessed”:

“Blessed are you among women, blessed is the fruit of your womb. . . And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by [God]” (Luke 1:42-45).

Richardson writes:

Barely beginning to take form, Jesus feels the jolt that goes through Mary when she hears this word, **blessed**. Something in the growing Jesus feels the way the word settles inside Mary when she recognizes it to be true. . . Jesus absorbs this. **Blessed** seeps into his forming cells, **blessed** passes from Mary’s flesh into his own. From the womb, he knows the power of receiving a blessing, of living within it. He understands what it means to inhabit this word, to dwell within one who has been named blessed.

Jesus knows this word from the inside. And so there comes a time when he begins to say it. Again. And again.

Throughout the Bible, blessing is most often linked not with privilege or happiness, but with sensing and paying attention to the presence of God. Richardson reveals the fullness of the word *blessed*. She writes:

it implies an ability to be in the ongoing process of recognizing, receiving, and responding. To be blessed is to enter a kind of pregnancy: to take [God] in, to let [her] grow in us, to bear her forth, then to receive him and bear him yet again in our acts of mercy, of compassion, of solidarity, of love.

Richardson reminds us that blessing is something that dwells in us, something we live within, something we know from the inside, not outside, not environment, not circumstance... blessing is something we carry that grows in us, something we birth and nurture... something we are in our full and flawed humanity, and something we sense and affirm to others in theirs.

We are blessed when we breathe in the breath of God and breathe out, in the words of the prophet Micah, acts of justice, and loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God.

The world needs it now, doesn't it? So much so that it can be overwhelming. Exhausting.

Our Sunday school class is currently discussing, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. It's written by Parker Palmer, a Quaker writer and activist who founded the Center for Courage and Renewal. In an article earlier this week, Palmer reflected on how to stay engaged in the shadow side of democracy -- a shadow many of us feel, and perhaps even fear, right now.

In wondering how to be and act in this time of deep national darkness, Palmer recalled the words of pastor and activist William Sloane Coffin:

There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with the world.

“God’s lover’s quarrel with the world” is exactly what the prophet Micah describes in the Hebrew scripture reading we heard this morning.

God was -- *is* -- agonizing over Her people’s injustices. They were -- *we are* -- forgetting the kindom, the beloved community, of God we are called to co-create; those at the top were -- *are* -- flourishing, yet they were -- *we are* -- disregarding and disenfranchising the poor and vulnerable among them -- *among us* -- the very people God continuously pleads with us to care for and defend.

And yet, as we heard -- as we know -- God doesn’t give up on the world and people She loves, regardless of our failures... and neither should we.

One of the best things I heard this week, other than Missy Elliot’s latest song, was [Valarie Kaur’s speech](#) at the Watch Night Service of the National Moral Revival’s Poor People’s Campaign.

Did any of you see it? Kaur is a filmmaker, civil rights lawyer, and interfaith leader from the Sikh tradition. To the hundreds gathered at Washington D.C.’s historic Metropolitan AME Church on New Years Eve, Kaur talked about the darkness our nation faces these days.

With Rev. Barber behind her, cheering her on, Kaur asked, “What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if America is not dead but waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if all [the protesters and peacemakers who came before us] are standing behind us now. . . whispering in our ear today, tonight, ‘You are brave.’ What if this is our nation’s great transition? What does the midwife tell us to do? ‘Breathe, then push.’”

Breathe, then push.

Let us breathe in the breath of God and push out justice and loving-kindness.

Like Jesus, let us go forth in our lives in revolutionary acts of sensing and loudly proclaiming the blessedness of the world, especially of the people and places in the shadows of deep injustice...

Blessed are the immigrants and refugees, *for they belong.*

Blessed is the Muslim community, *for they know God.*

Blessed are people of color, *for their lives matter.*

Blessed are the gay and queer, *for they are radically loved.*

Blessed is the trans* community, *for their sacredness knows no boundary.*

Blessed are the differently abled, *for they are equally gifted.*

Blessed are all the ones we Other, *for they are the face of God.*

Blessed are they.

Blessed are we.

Blessed are you.