

Benzonia Congregational UCC  
January 30, 2011  
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (A)  
Matthew 5: 1 - 12  
"Really?!"  
Dan Furman

Mysterious God,

In this life we try to stay on top of everything, create daily plans, organize our lives, yet you are the One that guides us, invites us, and blesses us. Forgive us when we do not see you or when we forget to look or listen. We pray that your Words inspire our discipleship this day and this week. We pray that the words that are spoken and the communion of our gathered thoughts, bring peace and glory to you, O God, for we believe that you are steadfast and transforming. Amen.

There's a commercial that came out a few months ago that I absolutely LOVE!! The music is whimsical, starting softly and growing with excitement as the commercial continues. We see rapid-fire, brief images of people in all sorts of circumstances, with one major theme in each moment: one person is looking at their cell phone and is completely oblivious to everything else that is happening around them.

One of the first images is of a person looking at their phone while in the background, dozens of beautifully-lit Chinese Lanterns drift upward into the night sky. Next a person is looking intently at her phone while jogging at a rather fast pace through a busy park with all sorts of people near her. Next is a guy sitting next to a girl on a roller coaster and he is looking at his phone while rocking back and forth on the ride.

Then we see a woman receiving a massage, the masseuse is using her elbows to massage while using her hands to text, and the person receiving the massage looks up and says, "Really?!"

Next is a father sitting on a teeter-totter, he is on the ground playing with his phone while his daughter sits on the other end up in the air waiting for him to finish what he is doing. Then we see a half frustrated and half perplexed groom starring at his bride as she walks with her father down the aisle while she is looking *at her phone*. Then there is a scene where the mother, father, and sister are all sitting at the dinner table and each one is looking at their own phone, while the younger brother stares off into space, waiting. Then there is a surgeon in the OR looking at his phone while a prepped patient waits and the nurses look at the doctor in shock and disbelief. Then there is a father and son playing catch, but the Dad is looking at his phone when the boy says, "Really?!" just before he throws the ball at his father in disgust.

Believe it or not, there are several more examples of one person fully engrossed in their phone while completely missing what is going on around them. Not only do I get a few wonderful belly-laughs when I see the commercial (ironically, it's a commercial to buy another phone!), but it seems to me that this is a perfect parallel to our Scripture lesson for today.

This morning we find Jesus in one of the more popular passages in the Bible. It is interesting to me that the Beatitudes bring such good feelings to us when we hear them, when in reality, they are a bit tough to really hear. Do we like them because we feel that Jesus is blessing us, that **we** are the recipients of his blessings? Do we like them because they are so different from parables or healings or miracles? Is it just the repetition of the sentence structure that brings us peace?

Just last Sunday, in our lesson, Jesus was asking individuals to follow him. Now, not only does he have students but he has quite a following; people who are rejoicing; people who are fearful; people who are filled with wonder; people who are confused. And Jesus recognizes that the crowd wants to hear him speak. So he sits down and begins to talk to them.

He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God." And though the crowd is not mentioned again in the entire passage, we can almost hear the bewilderment in the area. What?! Really?! How can the poor in Spirit, be blessed? And why would *they* receive God's kingdom? Shouldn't it be the Spirit-filled people who are blessed and to be the recipients of the realm of God? That's certainly the way most Christians feel it works today! If you are full of the Spirit, you are blessed, right?

Jesus continues, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." I mean on the one hand, it's good to know that if anyone is going to be comforted, it is those who mourn. They **certainly** should be the ones who are comforted, but it feels so awkward saying that those who mourn are blessed! **No one** wants to be in mourning. We would never send a card to someone who was grieving to give them congratulatory news. Really?! It just doesn't feel right. I thought we liked these Beatitudes?

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." The meek? The mild? This must have been **so very** shocking for the crowd around Jesus. All of his words would have been astounding, but this one; when everyone knew that the current "owners" of the earth were the Romans dominating and controlling the majority of the known world; how and why would it be that the meek, the gentle, the timid would be blessed and wrestle control away from the mighty Romans? That must have made quite a few in the crowds scratch their heads.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Here again, this would **not** have made sense to them. Maybe they thought he mis-spoke. They knew as well as Jesus that most people who stood up for righteousness against the Romans were not *filled*, but instead killed for threatening the status quo. Yet, here Jesus calls them blessed.

"Blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers."

And then we encounter again more disturbing language. "Blessed are those who are persecuted." What a dangerous calling in any time period in human history! It's hard enough setting aside money to pledge to the church. It's hard enough trying to maintain enough people on our boards and committees, but now you want us to not only go out into the world and share the good news, but you're saying we will be blessed *if* we are persecuted? Really?!

These words seem so alien to **us**, but to the early church in the first few hundred years after Easter, these would have brought such assurance to the early Christians. Every early Christian would have known someone who had been persecuted for their beliefs. What a relief it would have been to hear and to know that their suffering was not in vain. That they were blessed in their peacemaking between neighbors; that they were blessed as they mourned their losses; that they were blessed in their mild manners and actions; this would have been reassuring in the early days of the church.

So it was shocking when Jesus first spoke these words; it was comforting a few hundred years later; and then shocking again for us now, though maybe not as much so for Christians in lands where persecution is still a reality. But it is shocking for us here today! Jesus' words turn upside down what the world values today. How can Jesus declare that all who are poor in spirit, meek, and persecuted are blessed, when we live in a world that values a strong constitution of character, one who is boisterous and one who is aggressive or assertive? Do the Beatitudes even apply to us anymore?

Let us wonder together why Jesus describes these people as blessed. To be a peacemaker, you must first "see" war, violence, imbalance, and become so taken aback by what you see, that you decide to do something about it rather than ignore it. To be a mourner, you

must "know" loss, you must recognize that life is drastically different today than it was yesterday, you have to "see" and acknowledge how precious life and relationships truly are. To be meek, you have to understand that even though we try to control every aspect of our lives, even though we have plans, even though we have goals and agendas, to be meek, you have to recognize that life happens, and more so, that only God is God. To be persecuted, you need to be aware of the consequences of your Christian actions, that someone might not be supportive of your actions and sacrifices. Blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who are persecuted.

In our lesson for this morning, Jesus is challenging us to look past our cell phones, to look beyond all of our favorite distractions that limit us from our active discipleship. We all have things we would rather be doing than serving God. At least we can be thankful that God doesn't look at us in our daily lives and say, "Really?!" but instead, God challenges us to take a closer look around at what is happening right here as well as around the world. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Let us be mindful of all our surroundings and aware of the needs in the world that God is calling us to address. Amen.