

## **Love Your Neighbor: Healing**

### **Luke 13:10-13**

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“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. 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.”

They are among the most familiar and well-loved words in the Bible. Known as “The Beatitudes”, these eight verses from the gospel of Matthew seem to show up everywhere in Christian circles. You can find them printed on plaques in Christian bookstores or held in the hands of Hallmark figurines. They appeal to us for their parallel construction and poetic language - words that even superficially just sound like good religion - peacemaker and pure, righteous and merciful. Yet, despite their familiarity, or maybe because of it, I think we often neglect to see how radical and powerful they were when Jesus first said them and continue to be today.

Jesus speaks this series of blessings as the introduction to his sermon on the mount - the most comprehensive statement of his teachings found in one place in the Bible. And with these words, he turns upside down society’s typical ideas about who is “blessed”. The blessed are not the wealthy or the well-educated or the powerful. Rather, those who are blessed are those who live in love. The Beatitudes create both a vision of God’s reign on earth - what we sometimes call the Kingdom of God - as well as an instruction manual for those of us who want to be part of changing our world and fulfilling that vision.

It’s a brand new year - thank God! - and we are beginning a new sermon series. For the last several weeks, we have been dreaming with God about what a just and peaceful and loving world might look like. Now, with this series entitled “Love Your Neighbor: Here’s How”, we’ll look at Jesus’ teachings about how to get us there. If you want to summarize everything Jesus taught in one phrase, it would be “love your neighbor”. If you want to summarize how to do that, you look to the Beatitudes.

The word “beatitude” comes from the Latin “beati” which means happy, rich, or blessed. Each of the beatitudes has the same form - first a condition and then a result of that condition - an explanation for why the condition, which is usually something we would think of as negative, leads to a positive result in Jesus’ worldview. According to an article in the World Heritage Encyclopedia, “Together, the Beatitudes present a new set of ideals that focus on love and humility rather than force and exaction. They echo the highest ideals of Jesus’ teachings on spirituality and compassion.” As we start a new year, what better time to review and commit ourselves again to those ideals!

So, for the next six weeks, we’ll be looking at the Beatitudes and what we can learn about loving our neighbor in the New Year. And you’re not going to get just my point of view about this - in fact, you’ll hear from several different preachers - including, on February 7, our Bishop -

Bishop David Bard. Through the course of the series, they will share their ideas about how we as Christ-followers might, by embodying Christ's love, lead our world toward healing and wholeness. Each week we will also use beatitudes written by a member of our congregation as our call to worship for the week and we'll be posting ideas for acts of kindness to show your love for your neighbor on Facebook.

So, let's get started by looking at the first beatitude - "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". We know that Jesus showed great concern for the financially poor, but here he seems to be talking about a different kind of poverty. What is it to be poor in spirit? [A.W. Tozer](#) describes poverty of spirit as "an inward state paralleling the outward circumstances of the common beggar in the streets." To be poor in spirit, then, might mean to feel hopeless, full of despair, depressed or apathetic, burdened by shame or guilt, unable to see or care about the world around you.

There is perhaps no better example in the gospels of someone who is poor in spirit than the bent over woman Jesus heals in Luke 13. She shows up in the synagogue as Jesus is teaching on the Sabbath. Luke tells us that she was a "woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight." For eighteen years, this woman has suffered, and while her suffering presents physically, Luke makes it clear that it is a matter of spirit that has left her this way. Her spirit is broken, demoralized, and hopeless. Bent over as she is, she can't see anything but what immediately surrounds her on the ground. She can't look up and take joy in the beauty of Creation or make eye contact with someone who loves her or recognize how she might meet the needs of another.

After this past year, I think many of us are feeling poor in spirit. We are weary, seeking the strength to persevere. This has been an incredibly traumatic time for us as a country and as individuals. We have watched as a nation as over 350,000 people have died from Covid - and many of us have had family or friends among them. We've worried and prayed over those who have been sick even as we struggled with the fear that we would get sick, too. We have witnessed our collective sin of racism play out in deadly encounters between African Americans and the police - and listened to the anguish of our friends of color as they deal with their fear, their anger, and their weariness. We have participated in perhaps the most contentious election in our collective memory, symptomatic of the deep divisions in our country - and cried over the broken relationships those divisions have caused in our own lives.

After so much trauma we, individually and as a country, are all in need of healing, much like the bent over woman. Of course, what heals her is her encounter with Jesus. He sees her, calls her to him, and says, "Woman you are set free from your ailment." Jesus, who is the very embodiment of God's love in the world, heals her just by acknowledging her and her pain and offering her his love. This suggests that love is where the healing starts. Love for ourselves, love for our neighbors, love for even those people whom we distrust or disagree with.

But, let's look at the other half of that Beatitude. "Blessed are the poor in spirit *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" It seems completely nonsensical! Why would those who are poor in spirit - the depressed, the broken, the sad, the forgotten, the hopeless - why would the kingdom of heaven be theirs? One interpretation could be that old adage, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Yet, I'm inclined that it has more to do with empathy than strength.

The kingdom of heaven is commonly understood to be where God reigns - on earth as it is in heaven. If God reigns, then the kingdom is characterized by God's values - compassion, justice, kindness, joy. And who is more uniquely qualified to offer compassion and kindness to those who are hurting than those who have been hurt themselves? The pain we go through in our lives, those experiences that leave us feeling poor in spirit, so often lead us to greater empathy and deeper faith. That's why the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit.

After Jesus heals her, the bent over woman stands up straight immediately and begins to praise God. Her eyes lifted from the ground, she is able to see the wonders of God at work in the world as well as the needs of others. Having been healed by God's love, she is ready to extend that love to those she encounters.

So, how do we get to that place? How do we experience healing ourselves? How do we become part of the healing of our communities and country? We said earlier that love is the foundation of this work. But then what?

So much has been written on healing and reconciliation - particularly in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa. Yet, whether you look at approaches to healing at a communal level or to healing individual trauma in therapy, they all begin with the same thing - naming and acknowledging the wounds. Acknowledging our pain without judging it, swallowing it back, telling ourselves to "get over it", or pretending it's not there is the first move toward being able to heal. The bent over woman would never have encountered Jesus and his healing love had she stayed home rather than acknowledging her need for healing and seeking him out.

Once we have named and acknowledged our own pain, then perhaps we have a path toward helping us understand the pain of others. And understanding the pain of others with the same lack of judgment we offered ourselves is where empathy grows.

So, perhaps this is where we start this journey toward loving our neighbor - with healing. We start with searching our own hearts and hurts and acknowledging them, giving words to them. We speak our own truths about how this past year has challenged us and about the old wounds 2020 revealed. And then, having begun our own healing, we seek out opportunities to listen to others - to hear their stories, their truth, and their hurt - and we take responsibility not just for our own healing but for the healing of our community and country, as well.

May it be so. Amen.