The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

All Saints Day, Year A
8:00 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.
November 1, 2026

"Happy Heart"

A few weeks ago, we took part in the singing of Psalm 23. It is part of Emily's project to write a year's worth of psalm settings for Emmanuel Church. That morning, we discussed Psalm 23 and what makes it the favorite of all one hundred fifty psalms in the Bible. It is so beloved and so ubiquitous that many people without a word of prompting can say it from the heart. "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want" and so it goes. Even if we do not quite understand the meaning of the poem, it still makes us feel warm, loved, safe, and cared for. We are at home in the world because the great, good shepherd is looking out for us.

Today we heard and read another piece of beloved scripture—The Beatitudes. I would say that most, if not all, Christians recognize the label Beatitudes. But after that, I would guess that most Christians only remember that it is a list of blessings. They can remember that Jesus says "Blessed are…," but after that their memory trails off into some unspecific mumbling. It is sad because the Beatitudes are wonderfully profound. They are another instance when Jesus turns the world on its head through his teaching. But because we have not studied The Beatitudes in detail, we do not understand the wonderful nature of the promises Jesus is making.

These promises or blessings are not what we might expect. There are no blessings for those who are good. There are no blessings for those who are honest. There are no blessings for those who are pious, or those who are fair in business dealings, or do not litter, etc. Common morality is not what Jesus is talking about. These blessings are not for the perfect among us. These blessings are for the downtrodden, struggling, spiritually impoverished, the broken-hearted, and those yearning for another better reality.

Before we go further, it is important to note that the word Blessed is not an excellent translation choice. The Greek word behind it is *makarios*. A better translation is "happy," "fortunate," or "deeply satisfied." One translator prefers the English word "Congratulations" to Blessed. The point of these beatitudes is not that we are receiving blessings for our difficulties. Rather, we are told that our plight, minority position, difficulty is a gift. It is not bad to be meek but a compliment. It is not a burden to be in mourning, but something to be happy about. It is not onerous to be a peacemaker in a world full of discord and war; it is a mark of one who is fortunate. Jesus is thanking the people who suffer and strive for doing just that. Blessed conveys pity, while happy or fortunate conveys honor and happiness.

Let's make a list of those whom Jesus congratulates [look at your bulletin]:

1. The poor in spirit,
2. Those who mourn,
3. The meek,
4. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
5. The merciful,
6. The pure in heart,
7. The peacemakers, and
8. Those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

That is eight of them. The ninth is different and we will leave it for later.

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Note that the first four are about those who struggle or who are oppressed. This is how Jesus teaches. He turns conventional wisdom inside out. The normal view is to offer compassion to those who suffer. But not Jesus. He tells them that they are to be happy or think of themselves as fortunate. He tells the mourning that they can be happy because there is comfort ahead. He tells the meek that their meekness is a medal. He tells those who hunger for righteousness that their hunger is not in vain.

The next three beatitudes are considered attributes of virtuous people. We view the merciful, pure, and peacemakers as the best of humanity. But these are also rare virtues and often difficult to practice consistently. That is why we consider them marks of saintly and honorable people. Even those who can attain these virtues find them hard to do consistently. I have read a number of hagiographies, that is, lives of the saints. Those that are not fully redacted to remove any reference to their failings show us that even those we hold up as the best have flaws and shortcomings. We are simply not made to be good all the time. The difference between a saint and a villain is that saints those are good much of the time and sometimes fail, while others plan to do evil and use goodness as a disguise for their machinations.

Jesus tells us what the material world seems to honor and adore is worthless. The celebrity, monarch, athlete, warrior, and mogul are not mentioned as someone who should be happy. If we look at the similar list of beatitudes in the Gospel of Luke, it is not just that these people are not mentioned, but woes are cast upon them. The billionaire and trillionaire are not to be celebrated in God's kingdom. The worker in the food pantry, the healer of the sick and destitute, the ESL instructor, the clothes closet manager, the teacher, the hospice worker, and more are the heroes in the eyes of Jesus. They are the light of the world, even when the world ignores them in favor of fame, fortune, and notoriety. As an example of what Jesus is talking about here is a quote from Lee Iacocca: "In a completely rational society, the best of us would aspire to be teachers and the rest of us would have to settle for something less, because passing civilization along from one generation to the next ought to be the highest honor and the highest responsibility anyone could have."

Jesus is telling us to be happy in what the world finds inconsequential endeavors. But history is not kind to those who put their wants above the basic needs of others. Fame and adulation often turn to disgust. Monuments come down quickly. Statues of so-called great men are melted to make farm equipment and school desks.

Be proud, you who struggle, mourn, and are humble. Take heart, you who work for mercy, peace, and purity. Do not fall prey to those who revile you or deride you because you have lived into the roles of those whom Jesus loves. Without you, the world would be unlivable.

Congratulations to you. That is the point of the Beatitudes. Those who work for the Lord are to be celebrated. Each person who lives inside the Beatitudes is helping to make this world more like the Garden that God first made. The Beatitudes are with you in the best of times and in the worst of times. Live them. Feel them. Blessings go forward and come back. They are never stagnant. You have been blessed; now pass the blessing on like the happy and fortunate one that you are. That is what living the Beatitudes means for the world. As the psalmist wrote, "Taste and see that the Lord is good;/ happy are they who trust in him."[1]

[1] Psalm 34:8 BCP

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