

¹When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰“Blessed are those persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: **Thanks be to God!**

Matthew 5:1-16

02/08/2026 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“Strange Blessings”

Rev. Amy Terhune

When Rocky Bleier graduated from the University of Notre Dame in May of 1968, the world was a mess, but things were going well for Rocky. Notre Dame had won a national championship, and Rocky had a host of awards, honors, and accolades from high school and college football under his belt. Nobody was surprised when he was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers. But in the midst of his rookie season, Rocky was drafted by the US Army. He volunteered for service in Vietnam and was shipped over to South Vietnam in May of 1969, just one year after graduation. That summer, while on patrol, he was shot in the left thigh when his platoon was ambushed in a rice paddy. While he was down, bleeding profusely from a bullet wound, a grenade exploded mere feet from where he was lying. Bleier sustained heavy shrapnel wounds all along his right side, and his right foot was severely damaged. In hospital in Tokyo, doctors told him he'd never play football again.

But the Steelers weren't willing to just abandon him. When he returned stateside after several surgeries and a medical discharge in 1970, he went back to training, albeit informally, with the Steelers. Every step he took caused pain. His weight had dropped by at least 50 pounds. But Bleier would not give up. He did not want to look back and wonder what might have been, so he worked hard. He made special teams in 1971, but went three years with little actual playing time, and was passed over at least

twice for a spot on the line. After training hard in the off season, he earned a spot in the starting line in 1974. He played seven seasons as a running back for the Steelers, rushing nearly 4000 yards in seven seasons, completing 136 receptions and 25 touchdowns and playing in four Superbowls. Other names from the Steelers team at that time are better known, such as Terry Bradshaw, John Stallworth, and Franco Harris. But Rocky Bleier's tenacity and sheer determination is inspiring.

That tenacity and determination is something Jesus asks us to bring to our faith, not just our sports. In our lesson this morning, Jesus has returned from facing down temptation in the wilderness, called together a ragtag assortment of fishermen and tax-collectors and heaven-knows-what to be his disciples, and then journeys throughout the region healing people, which gains him quite a reputation. The people flock to him from everywhere. Chapter 4 ends with a big crowd and a pop star Jesus. Then we get to chapter 5, which begins: When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him, and he began to teach them..."

He's got a crowd of people hanging on his every word and gesture, longing to be healed and made whole, and Jesus departs from the crowd and takes his disciples up the mountain. Good thing Jesus isn't in customer service, because that would be really bad form. But really, this isn't a rotten thing he does. He's not abandoning the needy. Instead, he takes a time out with his disciples and begins by teaching them to see that crowd as 'blessed'. Blessed—not happy. Forget happy. Some will forever translate those beatitudes as 'happy are the poor in spirit' and so on, but the Greek is 'makarios' and it is difficult to translate into English. It can mean fortunate or blessed, which is how it is usually translated by responsible translators. But it connotes a kind of understanding, or being open to Spirit. Makarios. What is Jesus teaching his inner circle? That all those folks—the poor in spirit, the grieving, the meek, those who want justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted for doing right—all those folks are in the right frame of mind. The world may see them as wimpy, pathetic, unrealistic, useless, too conciliatory, or just generally contemptible. But Jesus warns his twelve to put on different eyes. That crowd out there knows it is in need. They're receptive to the Spirit, interested in deeper truths, ripe for the coming of God's kingdom. They are blessed because they're open.

Now I need take it a step further. This is not a teaching for the masses that are flocking around him. This is teaching for the disciples—the committed, the tenacious, the church. Not only do we need to put on new eyes and see those around us as blessed, but we must open ourselves to these very strange blessings.

The common accusation tossed at Matthew is that he has 'spiritualized' the teachings of Christ in this case. It's an accusation the church has faced—many times with legitimate reason—through most of its existence. Blessed are the poor in spirit, says Matthew. Blessed are the poor, says Luke. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, says Matthew. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst, says Luke. It does seem as if Matthew has spiritualized the issues and switched the focus from concrete issues of justice and need to something far more nebulous. And some might find that convenient. If one keeps the focus on issues of spirit only, then one is not obligated to actually challenge the political and social realities that make for suffering. But those who toss such an accusation at Matthew have not really grasped the purpose or meaning of Jesus' teaching. It's important we dig into what's going on here.

Remember that in Jesus' day, poverty, hunger, illness, tragedy and grief—all these life circumstances were thought to be 'punishment' for sin. If one got sick, that one must have done something wrong. If one didn't have material wealth and possessions, that one must be less in God's eyes. If one was poor, it was assumed that they were spiritually deficient. Otherwise, God would have blessed them. So if one was poor, one was also, by default, poor in spirit. Part of the reason the

religious leaders in that time were so cocky is because everyone assumed that the good fortune they enjoyed was because they were more holy, less sinful. They were spiritually attuned to God and proud of it.

Jesus turns that all on its ear. Not so, he says. One of the greatest gifts Jesus has given the world is to dismantle the notion that human circumstance is linked to God's favor or lack thereof. Outward circumstances matter—Jesus would never say they don't. But he would say that God matters most—that regardless of circumstance, the heart has the right and the opportunity and the need to commune with the divine.

Too often, people interpret the beatitudes as a bunch of rules—a list of 'shoulds' and 'oughts' we must do in order to be blessed. "But," says John Terry, "they're not the do-attitudes, they're the be-attitudes." [from "The Poor In Spirit" by John A. Terry, <https://sermons.com>.] We don't 'do' in order to be blessed. We respond because we already are blessed. God has already reached out and planted within us the seeds of possibility, a dynamic tension between passion and reason. Jesus isn't out to merely to shape our behavior. He's out to shape our being—the way we see and think. And when the truly committed open ourselves to that shaping, we will commune with the divine in such a way that will not only enliven the spirit within but ultimately enable us to live into and to be a new social and political reality in our time. And in this time, in this climate, in what's happening around us now, who we are matters.

Jesus is imparting a very challenging lesson to us, and the best way that I can find to really explain it is say what it's not. I'm going to put the opposites out there. I can flesh it out fairly quickly when I group similar things together, and I think we'll see the Christian life emerge from a list. I'm going to jump around some, but just roll with it.

The opposite of poor in spirit is not rich in spirit. Rather, it's proud in spirit—arrogant, self-reliant, egotistical. Similarly, the opposite of meek is domineering, controlling, overbearing. And the opposite of a peacemaker is one who would manipulate and control with violence or force. In other words, those who find the blessings of faith are those who think of others, those willing to be vulnerable and trust God, particularly when the future is uncertain. Then there are the pure in heart. The opposite of pure in heart isn't wicked or immoral at heart. Rather, it's polluted or tainted. Think pure gold as opposed to an alloy. OR a pure breed dog as opposed to a mutt. When it comes to metals and animals, impurities can be helpful, but when it comes to the human heart, 100% genuine, transparent, and devoted to God is what we're striving after. Blessed are those that mourn – another strange blessing. The opposite of those who mourn is not those who are joyful. Rather, it's those who are apathetic—who don't care, don't feel, don't want to be bothered. A heart that grieves is a heart that loves. In the same way, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness have a heart for justice; for seeing the world transformed into a more equal sharing of earth's resources. And those who are persecuted for the sake of doing what's right have taken the step in filling the hunger and acting out of that same love that can trigger grief. And then there are those who are merciful. The opposite of merciful is callous. "In the original Aramaic which Jesus spoke, the word "merciful" means literally "to get into someone's skin." It means to wear another's skin, as it were; to see life from their perspective, to stand in their shoes. [from "Getting Under Your Neighbor's Skin" by Dr. Bill Bouknight, <https://sermons.com>.] It is active empathy.

What Jesus is really saying here is that living our faith makes us vulnerable. It exposes us to suffering. It may well break our hearts. And yet, it gives us our purpose and identity. It drives our commitments. It is how God shapes who we are becoming. When we allow faith to take root in us – when we see ourselves as part of community, serving others with humility, gentleness, understanding, devotion, authenticity, courage, and empathy, we bless others and ourselves. Jesus told us who we are.

You are salt. You are light. These are identity statements. Before refrigeration and mass production of processed food, salt was the invaluable ingredient that preserved things through lean seasons. In Jesus day, they could use salt like cash. Roman soldiers were paid part of their salary in salt. In fact, the word "salary" is a derivative of the Latin word for salt. Another word we so often hear and use in the church also has its root in the Latin word for salt. That word is "salvation"—to be saved. That's what salt does, it preserves things, saves them. And salvation comes when we claim our identity as saved followers of Jesus Christ. We are salt because we are His. We are commissioned to continue His saving work. [adapted from "The Difference Is You" by King Duncan, <https://sermons.com>.] Salt may be bad for cardiac health, but it's vital to spiritual health.

Light, too, is our identity. You and I are called to be light – to be what God can use to bring sight, vision, insight, and hopefulness in the world. Thus, to be salt and light is to give a public dimension to spirituality. Some people find that very uncomfortable. There is a mistaken assumption out that that our faith is a private thing, a matter of the heart, and not something that has any place in policy-making, decision-making, or dream-making. Jesus would disagree. Light must shine out. Its very nature is to be visible. This doesn't mean Jesus is suddenly justifying a pompous display of religious piety. It means that if the love of God lives within us, our very nature will be to engage in life-saving, light-sharing work. It will be what we do. But even more, it will be who we are by our very nature.

The Winter Olympics started this week in Milan and several other locales in northern Italy. There are so many things I love about the Olympics—the spirit of worldwide togetherness, the momentary peace between nations, the nature of what's supposed to be friendly competition. Many will win gold and silver and bronze. We'll watch them mount the podium and receive the accolades of their peers. But there's one award you won't see. You probably won't even hear it mentioned by Mike Tirico or anyone else. "It's called the Pierre de Coubertin International Fair Play Trophy. The trophy is named for the founder of the modern Olympic Games, and it has been awarded annually since 1964 to people in sports who have demonstrated true nobility of spirit. In the past, the trophy has gone to a Hungarian tennis player who pleaded with officials to give his opponent more time to recover from a cramp, and to a high school basketball coach who forfeited the Georgia (US) state championship after he found out that one of his players was scholastically ineligible, and to a British rowing team who gave up their lead to stop and help the Danes fix a broken rudder. The first trophy went to an Italian bobsledder named Eugenio Monti for a gesture that exhibited a real class. In the two-man bobsled event at the 1964 Innsbruck Olympics, Monti was the leader after his final run. The only one who had a chance of beating him was Tony Nash of Great Britain. As Nash and his teammate got ready for their final run, they discovered that a critical bolt on their sled had snapped at the last moment. Monti learned of the problem and immediately took the corresponding bolt from his own sled and sent it up to Nash. Nash fixed his sled, came hurtling down the course to set a world record and win the gold medal." [adapted from *Bits & Pieces*, October 15, 1992, pp. 4-6; on <https://sermons.com>.] Leo Durocher's once said, "Nice guys finish last." But Jesus said, "the last shall be first". Winning isn't everything or the only thing. Character is. Who we are and how we represent Jesus in the difficult moments of our life – that's what lasts. That's what inspires. That's when we experience the Kingdom of God in our midst.

To live with character, to be a follower of Jesus in the world, is not something that just happens. It takes tenacity and sheer determination – a commitment to learn, grow, follow. But it's also a gift of grace to those who are 'makarios' – who know themselves to be blessed, open to the Spirit, poised to receive what God is sharing. So often, people will say "Well, I'm only human." But Jesus said, you are salt; you are light. And by grace, I mean to prove him right. Amen.