

## “CONTENT OF THEIR CHARACTER” – Rev. Murray Richmond

**MICAH 6:1-8**

**GOSPEL MATTHEW 5:1-12**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

*“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.*

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

This week I heard about an interesting study on the radio. The researchers took one group, and they did everything they could to boost their self esteem. They also had a control group, where they did nothing to boost their self-esteem. Then they gave both groups a difficult task to perform. What they found surprised them.

The people in the group who had their self-esteem boosted, actually did worse than the people in the group that did not. That was counter intuitive to what they expected to find. You would think that if you boost a person’s self-esteem, they will perform better on tasks, but in this study they found that was not the case.

There are a lot of counter intuitive things in life. If you are riding a bike, and start to fall to the left, it feels like you should turn left, but in fact you have to turn right to correct your fall. If you are canoeing, and get caught in sweepers, in branches and trees hanging over the river bank, it feels like you should tilt your canoe into the bank, but if you do you will swamp it.

In the Beatitudes, this morning’s Gospel text, Jesus says a lot of things that are counter intuitive. He says a lot of things that are puzzling, and do not seem to make sense, but as we look at them, we see they make very good sense.

Let's look in depth at the first one, and that will help us understand the others. Jesus gets up, opens his mouth, and says, Blessed are...the poor in Spirit.

Now that is probably not what we expect, even today two thousand years after Jesus first gave this sermon. When we think of people who are blessed, we don't jump right away to the poor.

We tend to think people are blessed if they have it all together. It is not the poor in spirit who are blessed, but the rich. Since when was poverty a blessing? I remember in the movie Fiddler on the Roof when Reperchek tells Tevye that money is the world's curse, and Tevye looks to heaven and says, "May God strike me with it! And may I never recover!"

But Jesus tells us that the poor, at least the poor in spirit, are blessed. That seems so counterintuitive, but as we follow Jesus the next few weeks, we will see a lot that is counterintuitive.

To get a handle on this, I want to go back to something I said I said last week. We were talking about the phrase, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand," and I made the point that was a good thing. Repent means to change, and when the Kingdom of God is here, we change some things, and we change those things for the better. I used the example of "repenting" because we had a spell of warm weather. Spending a Saturday outside was a change from how I normally spend Saturdays in January.

I said the coming Kingdom means some changes are in order, and I was trying to make the point that a) the coming kingdom is a very good thing, and b) the changes we make are also very good changes. This week we see what kind of changes Jesus may be talking about when he told us to repent, and this is the first one.

Blessed are the poor in Spirit. What does it mean to be poor in spirit? Jesus told a story about that once. Two people went to pray. One looks up at God, and tells God what a wonderful person he is, and how lucky God is to have him as a believer.

I thank you Lord that I know right and wrong in every situation. I thank you Lord that I never lack wisdom when I make decisions. I thank you Lord that I always know exactly what is on your mind. And I thank you Lord that when it comes to doing right and wrong, I never make a mistake.

Now there is a man who is rich in spirit. He has it all together. He has all the answers. He never doubts God, nor does he doubt himself. He does not have any personal struggles. All his relationships are in order. His wife is perfect, his children are perfect, his house is perfect, his job is perfect. Oh, he does have an alcoholic brother, but he is perfect in the way he deals with his

brother. This is a man who is very rich in spirit. And at the end of his prayer this man who was very rich in spirit looked over and saw a poor sinner at prayer. Maybe the man was homeless. Or an alcoholic. Or gay. Or someone who never went to church. Maybe he was that guy in the community who everyone else talks about, because, you know, he has problems.

And this other man, this paragon of depravity, this man who has no spiritual wealth, this man who's life is a mess, this man who could not tell right from wrong if it bit him on the nose, and who, even if he could tell, would never actually do what was right, looks up and prays, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Which prayer, Jesus asks, does God really hear? Which man, when it comes to what God values, is really blessed?

When I was a chaplain, I did a lot of work in the psych ward of the hospital. And it seemed like there were two types of people in the psych ward—those who had no idea why they were there, and those who knew that at this time in their lives, they needed to be there. We had one patient who was suicidal. His life had fallen apart. He was in the middle of a divorce, which was precipitated by an affair he was having. He drank too much. His wife had told him he could not see his kids without supervision. And he had lost his job, because his personal life had affected his work life. I knew him because he was a member of my church.

One Saturday night it just all piled up on him, and he decided to check out—permanently. He went to his garage, turned his car on, and sat in the car waiting to die from the exhaust fumes. As it turned out, the car ran out of gas, His ex-wife was worried about him, and sent a neighbor over to check on him. When the neighbor found him in the exhaust filled garage, she called 911, and he ended up in the hospital.

He had been there the usual three days when we asked him to stay another week. His first response was to point to another patient who had just checked out. "Why does she get to go, but you want me to stay?"

"We can help you," I said. "She has no idea that she even has a problem, and we will see her again in a few months. But you know you need help, and you are willing to get it."

He was in spiritual poverty, but he was blessed, because he was getting help. He was reaching out.

You see, the Christian life is NOT about making sure you have everything together. It is NOT about making sure that you have no problems. It is NOT about being so perfect that you don't need God.

Unfortunately we put a lot of emphasize on looking better than we actually are. Heaven forbid if people found out what we were actually feeling. Heaven forbid if people found out what was really going on in our lives. Heaven forbid if people found out how much we were really hurting at times—those times when we shrug it off, and say, “It’s ok.” I swear, most of us, if someone found us in a car wreck, bloody and bruised, and asked, “What can I do for you,” we would scratch the words, “I’m ok” in the dirt.

The wonderful thing about the Kingdom of God is that it is OK to NOT be ok. It is ok to have problems. It is ok to NOT have your life together. It is OK to hurt. It is Ok to be a mess.

It is OK to mourn, and by mourn I mean it is ok to hurt like hell at times. It is ok to feel like you miss someone so much, that you would almost rather not go on living.

It is OK to be meek, to not come across arrogantly, to not look strong in every situation. It is ok to sit back, because you don’t feel you have the resources to do what needs to be done. The world tends to value people who push their way to the top. Nice guys finish last, it is said. But Jesus tells us they *inherit* the earth. In the kingdom of God, we don’t need to fight for things we really want. They are given to us. They are our inheritance.

We can hunger and thirst for righteousness. We can look at the world and, “That is NOT Right!” In 1979 I went to Haiti for a summer. I lived in a small village, and got to know the people there. I saw their poverty, and I saw their happiness. I saw their need. I started to care about them as I got to know them. I wanted a better life for them.

But you know, it hurts to care. It hurts to look at the world, and to see the injustices. It is much easier to turn a blind eye and walk on by. I’ll tell you why. Because we cannot fix many of the problems. I told you about my parishioner who tried to kill himself. Just before we left, he was struggling with many of the same things. I could not fix him. We look at the larger problems in life—world hunger, drug addiction, poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia—and we know that we cannot fix the world. We hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice, because we do not see it. I remember one Saturday morning, my daughter, who was about four at the time, went to play with a friend, and he was mean to her. I don’t know what he did, but he was mean. And she came home crying, and one of the things she said through her tears broke my heart. “It’s Saturday, and we are suppose to play on Saturday. It is not supposed to be THIS way.”

And she was right. Little girls are not supposed to come home crying because their friend was mean to them. Nor are they supposed to grow up in a house where their parents are drug addicts. They are not supposed to be sexually abused. They are not supposed to be neglected. They are not

supposed to live in grinding poverty, where they parents are too poor, or too stoned, or too messed up to buy them Christmas presents.

But they do. We can close our eyes to those things, because seeing them, really seeing them hurts. If we open our eyes to the injustices in the world, one thing we will quickly realize is that we cannot fix all the problems in the world. And it is easier to just ignore them, but in the Kingdom of God, it is blessed. Because the ONLY way the world will get any better, is if someone dares to care. And if we cannot fix all the problems of the world, we can help some people. We cannot eliminate hunger in the world, or even in Medford, but we can help a few people. And when we dare to care enough to start doing something, we find fulfillment. Ask those who work with Wednesday night live, or the Food bank. Ask those who do countless random acts of kindness.

Jesus goes on. Blessed are the merciful. In the world, we seek vengeance. In the kingdom of God, we learn to show mercy. Maybe that is because we have received mercy. When we are on top, we use that position, not to lord over others, but to pull them up. Winning the rat race only means you are best rat. When I worked with troubled youth, I saw a disturbing behavior. When one kid started to do better, the other kids would try to pull him back. One kid would be climbing out of the mess that was their life, and the other kids would try to pull him back into the mess. If they could not see a way out, they did not want anyone else getting out.

But some kids would try to help others. One of the worst kids we had was in a group home with another kid who was a total mess. And for reasons I will never understand, that really, really bad kid took the other kid under his wing. He protected him at school. He stood up for him the group home. And as he showed mercy on that kid, he experienced it in his own life. I realized he was doing for that one kid what he wished someone had done for him. And the cool thing, as he was showing mercy to the kid who needed, he was experiencing it in his own life.

Blessed are the pure in heart. I will take a lesson from my own sermon this morning and just say that I am still working on that one. I don't really understand that one. What I did come up with is that being pure in heart means being yourself. I was discussing love with someone, and I said that love is giving your best self to others, and he said, "No, love is simply giving yourself to others." Being pure in heart means we don't have to put on airs, or hide who we really are. We are who we are, and we have learned to live with that.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Peace, of course, is not the absence of conflict. Peace is learning to live with conflict. People who try to squelch conflict are not peacemakers. They are peacekeepers, and often do more damage than good. No, we are peacemakers, not in our ability to keep conflict from happening, but more in the way we deal with it. We will talk more about that in a few weeks. But let me tell you something that years of marriage counseling (and one bad marriage) has taught

me—conflict is not bad, in and of itself. The way we DEAL WITH conflict may be bad, but conflict is inevitable. Peacemakers do not avoid conflict—they are just not controlled by conflict.

In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus is giving us his view of what the kingdom of God looks like. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

This kingdom is not just for the rich. As a matter of fact, it is a place where people who do not have it all together are especially welcome, so if you think you are unworthy of the kingdom of God, that just proves how ready you are for it. It is a place where we can hurt, where we can mourn. It is not for stoics, who have determined to never feel any pain.

It is a place where you don’t win by clawing your way to the top. You win by not joining the rat race at all. It is not about dying with the most toys; it is about living with the life God has given you.

It is a place where we can dare to care for others, where we can dare to dream for a better world by doing what we can, where we can, even if we cannot make a perfect world.

It is a place where we don’t have to win all the time; it is a place where helping others win is valued more.

It is a place where we can be ourselves, where our false fronts are not needed, and in fact are a detriment.

It is a place where we can act peaceably in the midst of conflict.

That’s the good news.

Now there is some bad news here. People don’t want to live that way. Some people will not want YOU to live that way. They don’t want you to be yourself. They want you to be like them. Remember the kids I talked about earlier, that tried to pull back the ones who are succeeding. Well, the bad news, it is not just something those kids do. It is pretty prevalent in our society. And if you take Jesus at his word, especially in this section of Matthew, you will look different. As Flannery O’Connor once said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.”

But it also makes you free. In here, in these words of Jesus, we find words of truth and freedom.