

Circle of Mercy Sermon
Matthew 5:1-12 “The Grain of Grace”
September 20, 2015
by Missy Harris

I’ve been thinking about Michael Lapsley, our guest from South Africa last week who shared some of his story with us in worship. I heard him again on Monday night at Warren Wilson when he spoke to a group of students there. I won’t recap his story here, except to say that I have been thinking about the concept of grace this week because of his story.

When he was talking with us last week, there was a phrase he used when he described how he has been able to respond to his injuries from the letter bomb he received and how he has been able to live a life that was not diminished or completely defined by his injuries since that point.

Michael said: “I have learned to go with the grain of grace.”

That phrase wouldn’t let me go. It was palpable in every story that he told. It was palpable when he talked about real acts of forgiveness and mercy and grace in his own life and in the lives of others who have experienced immense trauma – both physical, emotional and psychological.

The image that came to mind was working with wood, which I haven't done a lot myself. There are probably plenty of you among us who are far more experienced than I am when it comes to woodworking.

I spent a lot of time with my grandparents when I was growing up. They lived down the hill from us. On summer and fall evenings, we would sit in lawn chairs under the maple trees in their driveway. My Pappaw would often hand us a stick or block of wood and a small knife, and we would whittle and carve for hours on end. Sitting under those maple trees, I learned about the importance of working with the grain of wood, and I had a few bloody fingers and plenty of splinters that reminded me why my Pappaw warned me about going against the grain.

Whether you go against or with the grain of a piece of wood has serious implications for both functionality and safety. The grain of the wood serves as a guide – aiding the carver/woodworker's hands to shape the wood into something else.

When I was looking for a good description of how to recognize and carve with the grain of the wood, the best description I found was this: Describing how to

recognize when you are going with the grain of the wood is difficult. You will know it, when you feel it.

In hearing Michael's reflections last week, I felt it in his words – how he goes with the grain of grace.

We are focusing on the Sermon on the Mount over the next few Sundays. And tonight we turn our attention toward the Beatitudes - that long list of “Blessed are those who....” statements.

Jesus had just started his ministry in Galilee. He called the disciples and they were following along with him. They had just put down their nets and were probably not quite sure what they had gotten themselves into with this man who was preaching that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 4:17).

Before continuing in their journey, Jesus stepped away from the crowds and went up the mountain. This is one of those subtle scene changes that we need to pay close attention to. It's not just for a change of scenery or location that Jesus went up the mountain. In the biblical narrative, important things happen on mountains – you remember Moses at Mount Sinai and the transfiguration later in the Gospels...

So, the disciples followed Jesus up the mountain. We don't know for sure if the crowd remained within hearing distance, but it's possible that they witnessed the movement of Jesus and his closest followers up the mountain, away from them for a short time.

The disciples gathered around Jesus, with the crowd that they had just left in the background – a crowd that was filled with people who were sick, diseased, in pain – both physical and emotional – a crowd of people who were seeking wholeness and healing.

And Jesus began speaking to and teaching the disciples. He started with what we know as the Beatitudes – the familiar words:

When we hear the Beatitudes, the words often feel both very familiar because we've heard them so often and completely foreign because they are counter to the way we witness the world working.

The world doesn't say:

Blessed are the poor in spirit...Instead the world says they are weak.

Blessed are those who mourn...Instead the world says, you have a few days of paid leave after the death of a member of your immediate family, then it's time to get back to work.

Blessed are the meek...Instead the world says, you are submissive and I can capitalize on your tendency to comply.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness sake... Instead the world says, your convictions don't matter or make a difference here.

Blessed are the merciful...Instead the world says, you should seek retribution and revenge.

Blessed are the pure in heart...Instead the world says, you are naïve.

Blessed are the peacemakers...Instead the world says, power and force are the only way.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake...Instead the world says, your efforts toward a higher ideal are going to get you killed.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely... Instead the world says, that's just plain dumb.

The Beatitudes ran counter to values of the world that the disciples knew and experienced. They had probably seen and known firsthand that these "blessings" Jesus spoke about were not the values reflected in the culture and politics of their day. They had also just been in the midst of a group of people who would have been in the categories that Jesus named: the poor in spirit, mourners, the meek, the pure in heart...and the needs were so great. The disciples themselves likely fell into some of these groups.

I wonder how many of them were ready to head back to the familiar, predictability of their fishing nets.

These words also run counter to the values that we witness in our world today.

Those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus often misunderstand the Beatitudes as well:

They are often read as if-then statements – something that requires us to behave in a certain way or take on specific characteristics in order to receive some benefit.

If you are poor in spirit, then the kingdom of heaven will be yours.

If you are meek, Then you will inherit the earth.

If you hunger and thirst for righteousness, then you will be filled.

But this is exactly the opposite of what Jesus is saying. He isn't saying, "if you do this, then you will receive this in return." It's not a rigid set of things you need to do in order to be in God's favor.

Jesus called the disciples away from the crowd that was pressing in upon them – a crowd that likely was filled with more sickness and pain than they could even begin to address.

Maybe he recognized that they needed to step away for a moment for some private instruction and teaching. There were some things that they needed to know that would provide the foundation for **all the work** ahead of them, for the work that

was already pressing in on them in the form of the crowd they left at the base of the mountain.

The Beatitudes are statements that name what and who – has **already** been blessed – before the disciples even got started in their work. It wasn't a checklist for the disciples to work through in order to make the grade or to keep their jobs. It wasn't a checklist for them to carry around and judge who among the crowds truly deserved the help and healing that they may have to offer.

The Beatitudes are an affirmation of what is already true before the disciples (or we) do anything. The Beatitudes state in clear terms what is already present: God's love and hope and abundant grace for the world that has already been freely given.

These blessings are not something that the disciples (or we) bestow upon our selves or upon others. These aren't blessings that we take into the world. Rather, these blessings offer the disciples (and us) a reminder of how God is already at work in the world ahead of us, before we act or do anything.

These blessings do not imply that God condones or encourages pain and suffering. They are statements implying that God has not abandoned any of us. They are statements that remind us which voices we need to listen for, which voices we need to seek out and which voices we need to privilege. As followers of Jesus, we are called to join in the work with God who already offers blessings in the least expected of places, blessings that can't be earned through any effort of our own or bought with any amount of money we may have.

Attending to these foundational blessings – aware that God is already at work in the world before we even consider getting started – enables us to engage in a world and culture that tends toward despair and apathy, a world and culture that fails to recognize where the spirit is at work and alive among us.

Verses 11-12 offer a word of caution – the world IS going to respond where God is already at work, and the response doesn't have a very positive track record.

Attending to and privileging the voices on the margins is not going to win a presidential election. Attending to and privileging the voices on the margins is not going to win ANY popularity contests.

Jesus was preparing the disciples for the situations they would be encountering and people they would be meeting along their journey. He was giving them the tools to interpret and understand where to look for God's hope and grace already at work ahead of them.

And he gave them fair warning, that when they ventured into the world with their message of hope and healing and with their actions that would go with the grain of blessing and grace, there would be hard times and persecution – that they would witness others being persecuted. But they would be in good company.

Throughout history, the world hasn't looked too kindly upon those who have joined in this grace-filled work with God, but such history does not make the work any less true or worthy.

The disciples and Jesus had just come from the midst of a crowd of people – people who had extensive needs and pain, who had probably experienced a lot of suffering. As Jesus taught them on the mountain, with the crowd in the background, he reminded them that God was already present in the midst of the people they had just left. And their task was to join in God's work already happening right in the middle of that very crowd of people – and in the midst of all the people they would encounter.

How does such a shift in thinking impact us?

How often do we enter into situations with the attitude (sometimes conscious/sometimes not) that we are bringing in the justice, the hope, the peace, the love and the opportunity to recognize grace – that we have the right answers and solutions – without seeing the resources and wisdom and nuances of what is already present before we even arrive?

How might our understanding, outlook and approach be changed if we pause – even if just for a brief moment – before entering a situation or encounter to consider where and how God might already be at work ahead of us, where the blessing already rests before we lift a finger or say a word?

I have been there, and maybe you have too: charging into a situation – thinking I have THE solution, only to find out that I don't even have all of the essential information that would enable anyone to make an informed decision or response.

So what if we take a moment to pause?

I think it's in the moments of pause, when we take the opportunity to step away from the crowd, walk up the mountain, find the space to be reminded of the work that has taken place before we even arrive – that we can most effectively return to the work ahead of us.

The Beatitudes offer us an invitation into the work that God is already doing in the world – an invitation into pure grace – that precedes us and follows behind us – wherever we go. It is an invitation to travel willingly into the places where God is present and the Spirit is alive and at work, where God's blessing is already offered, where we can make the choice to contribute to or diminish God's message of grace.

When I think about our current context – in our country, state and community, the work seems so overwhelming. It can feel paralyzing. I have been reading a collection of essays called *The Impossible Will Take a Little While* by Paul Loeb, and the overarching theme of the essays is how to sustain hope in the midst of so much uncertainty, destruction and pain – when it is difficult or nearly impossible to see or recognize even the smallest glimpses of the kind of blessing and grace described in the Beatitudes.

What the writers of these essays have reminded me is this: In the words of Vaclav Havel, “Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.”

We must attend to the work ahead of us because it is good and it is the work that has already been going on in the world before we even arrived, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. If we are looking for guaranteed success, we should probably stop right now. But I am glad that I am in the midst of a group of people not ready to stop right now.

We invite you to explore the Sermon on the Mount with us in the coming weeks. There will be opportunities to hear from folks like Ethan, who has been working over the past year and a half with leaders in the Black Lives Matter movement in Ferguson and Baltimore and New York; and Kim and Stan, exploring our past and ongoing relationship with churches in Cuba.

There will be opportunities to engage in study, prayer, art and conversation about how these foundational teachings of Jesus inform our living and our working in a world that operates from a different set of values.

Please join us one or more of the conversations/gatherings. Read the Sermon on the Mount on your own. Think about where it resonates (or doesn't resonate) with you in your daily life/work. Where are you connecting or joining in the work of blessing and grace that precedes us and follows us, wherever we may go?

When we align our selves in these kinds of places – it's hard to describe how it happens or how it works – but when we go with the grain of grace, we will know it when we feel it.

Amen.