

the Church, formed

Matthew 16:13-20 (1 Peter 2:4-12)

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Before I begin, I want you to know
that I prepared this sermon in Berkey's first and second grade Sunday school classroom.
When I opened the door, chimes hanging on the door welcomed me inside.
You know what? I'd like chimes to ring whenever I enter a room.

I felt good in that space. I felt welcomed.
When I looked around, I saw art on the walls and windows proclaiming peace.
I saw a bookshelf loaded with books.
I saw a shelf of markers, colored pencils, crayons and glue.

On a corkboard, there's a sign with a reminder
of how everyone in this room should act and treat each other.
There's Bible verses from illustrated with photos,
Jesus said, "I am the bread of life,"
"I am the light of the world."
"I am the good shepherd."

And, behind me, there was a whiteboard with the order of what happens when this class meets:
snack and sharing,
Bible memory and singing,
story and reflecting,
responding and creating,
good-bye and blessing.

It feels like the rhythm of a worship service, doesn't it?

You know, it's relatively easy to understand how the things that happen in that room
help our children learn about Jesus and what it means to faithfully follow him.
And the thing is, I could have sat down in the other classrooms and pointed out similar things.
This is an important ministry of our church,
and I'm thankful for our Sunday school teachers who devote themselves
toward the spiritual formation of our children.

Yet, spiritual formation, of course, is not limited to children's Sunday school classrooms.
No matter our age, we all are in the process of being formed.
We all are in the process of becoming.
The question is, into whom are we becoming?

In Matthew's gospel, chapter 5, we find what Matthew records
as Jesus' first words to God's people.
"God loves you, no matter what. Choose God's way,"
the whiteboard in our first and second grade classroom says.
Matthew, chapter 4, verse 23 through chapter 5, verse 12.

*Jesus went throughout Galilee,
teaching in their synagogues,
[]proclaiming the good news of the kingdom,*

*and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.
So his fame spread throughout all Syria,
and they brought to him all the sick,
those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains,
demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.
And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis,
Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.*

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain;
and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.
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.
Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

In some ways, you might find it kind of odd
to begin a sermon focused on spiritual formation,
with verses proclaiming God’s blessings.
After all, when we think of formation – in anything --
we often think in terms of what we do.
In that sense, some might think it might be more appropriate
to talk about what comes after the Beatitudes,
which are Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount
about the practices, the ethics of disciples.
As Mennonites, we feed on ethics.

We take pride in our ethics.
We divide over ethics.

Yet, we can sometimes forget that when it comes to what God asks from us,
how we live into our lives as disciples,
how we all are being formed by God,
we begin not with ethics but with blessing.

The Beatitudes come at the very beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.
Before Jesus asks his disciples to do anything,
he blesses them.
Jesus blesses before he commands.

It's the "God loves you no matter what."
before we get to what it means to "Choose God's way."

If we don't begin with God's love, God's grace, God's blessing,
we won't understand Jesus.
We will be either driven to despair because we can't measure up
or we'll condemn others because they can't measure up.

Both of those responses stunt our growth, our formation as disciples,
and sadly, they can stunt the spiritual formation of others as well.

So let's look more closely at Jesus' blessings,
Jesus' first four blessings are for those in great need.

Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you who have always felt "unspiritual",
who do not have it all together,
you who seem to have more questions than answers,
you who are empty,
you who believe that you do not have God's favor
because of what you have done, who you are.

Blessed are you who are helpless,
who groan in your spirit because of your struggle, your poverty.

Blessed are you, because God helps those who can't help themselves.

Blessed are you, Jesus said, because look up!

I am here on your side, and the kingdom that I bring is especially for you!

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

Blessed are you when you cry unexpectedly,
when simple everyday things bring back memories
of who you have lost and what you have lost.

Blessed are you who continue to grieve in silence, in secret,
when everyone else has moved on;
you who mourn the loss of relationships;
you who mourn your own mistakes, the mistakes of your children.

Blessed are you, because people in deep sadness are in God's comforting hands.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are you who are living on the underside of the American dream;
you who are shy, intimidated;
who find yourselves being constantly run over by others;
you who believe that the anger directed against you is entirely justified;
you who are more comfortable in the shadows, unseen,
you who make no claims for yourself before God or before other people.
Blessed are you who are powerless, oppressed, who need to stay invisible.
You who are called undocumented, illegal, unworthy.
You who are being trampled into earth, into dust.
Blessed are you, because you have a God
who will give you much more than a country to call home –
you have a God who will give you the whole earth!

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

Blessed are you who know exactly what the Apostle Paul
is talking about when he wrote,
“I don’t understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right,
but I don’t do it; I do the very things I hate.”
Blessed are you who feel that your secret sins
are too bad to bring into the light;
you who inwardly are screaming to made pure from your addictions.
You who long for and work for justice on the streets, for things to be made right.
Blessed are you, because you have a God
who will fill your plates and your cups with that which you crave.

The first four blessings are for those in need.
The next three are for wanting to help those in need.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are you who often find yourself being taken advantage of; then regretting it;
you who others consider so naïve;
you who know that no good deed goes unpunished, as the saying goes.
Blessed are you, for you take after your God,
who shows you the same mercy that you give to others.

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

Blessed are you who desire to please God above all else but struggle to know how;
Blessed are you who ask God for guidance and direction;
you who devote yourself to prayer and fasting;
you who long for wisdom on what to do or say to help those you love.
Blessed are you who know purity as not a gift but a struggle.
Blessed are you, for you will see the only One worthy of your heart’s full devotion.

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

Blessed are you standing in the gap,
the ones always in between;
the ones constantly looking to complete the circle,

you who have found yourself between two arguing parents;
you who stand alone, not trusted by anybody;
you who believe passionately that God does not will the destruction of enemies;
you who are called cowardly, unpatriotic; a traitor;
you who feel so misunderstood.

Blessed are you, for you take after your God in heaven,
the one who has adopted you, cares for you, and loves as God's own child.

**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**And blessed are you when people insult you,
persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Jesus.**

**Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

Blessed are you who are insulted, gossiped about; laughed at;
you who seem out of step with everyone else;
you Jesus freak, the "religious type"; the holier-than-thou disciple;
blessed are you whose very presence dampens the fun;
you whose loyalty to the kingdom of God
is interpreted as unpatriotic in the kingdoms of this world.

Blessed are you who bleed as you seek justice in the name of Jesus.

Blessed are you because you have a God who will give you the kingdom of heaven.

When it comes to what God asks from us,
when it comes to how we all are being formed by God,
we begin with blessing.

Before Jesus asks his disciples to do anything,
he blesses them.

Jesus blesses before he commands.

Spiritual formation, your spiritual formation,
first means placing yourselves in the presence of the God
who has blessed you before you ever deserved it.

The God who welcomes you with chimes.

Our choice then, is whether to live our lives out of God's approval
or to continue on the never-ending quest to earn approval from God and others.

The Didache, one of the oldest Christian documents, begins like this:

"There are two Ways, one of Life and one of Death,
and there is a great difference between the two Ways."

What do you need to do to place yourself in the hands of your God?

What do you need to do live your live out of God's approval?

Our spiritual formation begins there, and from there,
we all grow as God's children.

As I mentioned, I prepared this sermon in Berkey's first and second grade classroom.

It wasn't until I was almost finished that I saw what was hanging above me.

A string of Beatitudes.

1 Peter 2:4-12.

*As you come to him, the living Stone—
rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—
you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house
to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices
acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:*

*“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.”*

*Now to you who believe, this stone is precious.
But to those who do not believe,*

*“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”*

and,

*“A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”*

*They stumble because they disobey the message—
|which is also what they were destined for.*

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, God’s special possession,
that you may declare the praises of him
who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
Once you were not a people,
but now you are the people of God;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.*

*Dear friends, I urge you,
as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires,
which wage war against your soul.
Live such good lives among the pagans that,
though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he
visits us.*

*God loves you, no matter what!
Choose life. Amen.*