

**“The Power to Bless”**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday  
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
*Matthew 5:1-12*

*When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:*

- *“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.*
- *“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.*
- *“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.*
- *“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.*
- *“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.*
- *“You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.*
- *“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.*
- *“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.*

*“Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble (The Message).*

We've been opening the gift of Christmas one truth at a time for the last several weeks. We've learned that it wasn't just a beautiful baby boy under the tree, but the Savior of the world, the King of Kings, the Beloved Son, the Lamb of God, and the Proclaimer of the Kingdom. Today I want to talk about Jesus as the Prophet like Moses, and that's going to take some explaining.

Moses, as you know, was the one who brought God's people out of their slavery in Egypt, the one who led them through the Red Sea on dry ground, who brokered the covenant between God and his people at Mount Sinai, and who took them to the very edge of the Promised Land. God's people attributed the first five books of the Bible—the *Torah*—to him and thought of him as the greatest prophet who had ever lived. So when he said, in Deuteronomy 18:15, "The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen," the people listened, and they began to look for someone they called "The Prophet Like Moses."

Some of them have been looking ever since.

In John 1:21 some priests and Levites come from Jerusalem to ask John the Baptist who he is and one of the things they ask is if he is "the Prophet," meaning the Prophet like Moses. In the story about Jesus feeding the multitude in John 6 the people begin to wonder if this is "the Prophet who is to come into the world," thinking perhaps about how Moses gave God's people manna in the wilderness (John 6:14). And just before Stephen is stoned to death for his faith in Jesus he reminds the Jewish council that Moses himself had said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. It is to him you shall listen" (Acts 7:37). On a website called

“Hebrew for Christians” John J. Parsons lists thirty ways in which Jesus is like Moses. I won’t read all of them to you now, but many of his references are to the Gospel of Matthew, where it becomes obvious that—among other things—Matthew wanted us to understand Jesus as the long-awaited “Prophet like Moses.”<sup>i</sup> It’s in Matthew, after all, that Jesus spends his early childhood in Egypt, that his life is threatened by a wicked king, that he flees to the desert, and in today’s Gospel reading goes up on a mountain—just like Moses. But this may be as good a time as any to say that even though Jesus went up on a mountain like Moses, he wasn’t just like Moses. And even if John J. Parsons can think of thirty ways in which Jesus is like Moses, I can think of a thousand ways in which Moses is not like Jesus. Don’t get me wrong; I like Moses. I’m a *huge* Moses fan. But Moses is no Jesus, and as we continue in the Gospel of Matthew that will become clearer. For today let’s acknowledge that—like Moses—Jesus went up on a mountain, but instead of coming down with the Ten Commandments he sat down and began to teach the people, and he began with words of blessing.

I was thinking about blessing last week, and about who has the power to bless. At one point in my dad’s funeral service I said, “I have seen the look in his eye when he says, ‘I love you,’ or ‘I’m proud of you.’” But it was only on the way home that I realized how much those words meant coming from my dad, and how much less they might have meant coming from someone else. Fathers have a power they often aren’t even aware of. They don’t know how much it means to their children when they say, “I’m proud of you,” or how much it hurts when they says, “I’m ashamed of you.” They have

the power to bless and the power to curse, and that power is real. In some times and places that power has been understood as almost magical.

There's a story from Genesis 48 where Joseph brings his two Egyptian-born sons to their grandfather, Jacob, so he can bless them (remember Joseph? The one who was sold into slavery by his brothers? The one who became second-in-command over all Egypt? Well, it's that Joseph who brings his sons to their grandfather, Jacob, so that he can bless them). Jacob was old, and nearly blind, and so Joseph positioned his sons in front of him with Ephraim at his left hand and Manasseh at his right. But when Jacob reached out to give the boys his blessing he crossed his hands, putting his right hand on the younger son and his left hand on the older. Joseph said, "Not so, my father! This one is the older one. Put your right hand on his head." But Jacob said, essentially, "Leave me alone, son! I know what I'm doing." And he gave the greater blessing to the lesser son (Gen. 48:13-19).

It's almost what Jesus does here.

I'm indebted to a scholar named Alyce McKenzie for pointing out that there were beatitudes in the Bible even before Jesus. The word means something like "How happy, how fortunate, how blessed are those who find themselves in certain circumstances." There's a beatitude in Proverbs 3:13: "Happy are those who find wisdom and those who get understanding." There's another one at the beginning of Psalm 119: "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the way of the Lord." And another in the very next verse: "Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart." McKenzie says these are examples of "a wisdom genre common to the Old

Testament Psalms and Proverbs. In the Old Testament, Israel's sages and poets use them to commend admirable but traditional attitudes and actions."ii You might call these examples of conventional wisdom. "If your way is blameless, you'll be happy. If you find wisdom, you'll be blessed. If you keep the Lord's decrees it will go well with you." They come from a time when people believed that if you did all the right things and said all the right words you would be blessed, and if you weren't blessed it was because you had messed up in some way.

But Jesus sits down and looks around at some of the most messed-up people you can imagine, and then he begins to offer them his blessing: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek. It's an unconventional wisdom that just doesn't make sense until you consider who's saying it and what he's up to. Who's saying it? Jesus, the Savior of the World, the King of Kings, the Beloved Son, the Lamb of God, the Proclaimer of the Kingdom, the Prophet like Moses. His blessing has power like nobody else's power, like when your dad asked you to do something when you were a kid and you made the mistake of asking why. "Why?" he asked. "Because I said so, that's why!" It's like that with Jesus. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he says, and if anybody has the nerve to ask why he might say, "Because I said so, that's why." And because he said so they *are* blessed. They discover, as Eugene Peterson reminds us, that with less you there is more of God; those who mourn discover that when you lose what is most dear to you, you can be embraced by the One most dear to you; and the meek discover that when you become content with just who you are, you find yourself the proud owner of everything that can't be bought.

When Jesus says it you can almost feel the burden lifting, simply because it's him, and because he has power like no one else—not even Moses. I said it under my breath at my father's graveside on Thursday: "Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted." And right then, right there—the load got lighter. So it helps to remember who is saying these things, and it helps to remember what he is up to. He is the Proclaimer of the Kingdom, remember? The one who said, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." In other words it's right around the corner: it could be here at any minute. He's the one who called disciples to help him do the work of the Kingdom, and to hasten its arrival. He's the one who taught his disciples that when the Kingdom comes, the last will be first and the least will be great. The world as it is, in other words, will be turned upside down.

So, blessed are those who are poor in spirit *now*, he might say, because they are about to inherit the Kingdom of heaven. And blessed are those who mourn *now*, because when it comes they will be comforted. And blessed are the meek, the ones who never ask for anything, because when the Kingdom comes they're going to get everything. On and on it goes: the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be completely satisfied; the ones who are merciful will receive mercy; the pure in heart will see God; the peacemakers will be called the children of God; and the persecuted will be given the keys of the Kingdom.

Conventional wisdom tells us that's not true. Conventional wisdom says that if we keep our heads down, and work hard, and play by the rules we can make a comfortable living and have a nice home in the suburbs and when we retire maybe go

on a cruise. But we have to remember who is saying those things and what they are up to. They are those who speak with the wisdom of this world, and what they are up to is making sure things stay exactly as they are. Not so with Jesus. He speaks with the wisdom from above, and the last thing he wants is for things to stay exactly as they are. He wants the world to change. He wants to turn it upside down. And he speaks with the power to make it so. The question for us, really, is who we will follow and whose voice we will hear. Will we hear the voice of conventional wisdom, and follow the way of the world? Or will we hear the voice of Jesus, and follow the way of the Kingdom? I think Jesus would say you'll be blessed if you do. And now you have to ask yourself,

“Is that true?”

—*Jim Somerville, © 2017*

---

<sup>i</sup> John J. Parsons, “Moses’ Prophecy of Messiah: Jesus as the Prophet like unto Moses” (from the Hebrew for Christians website: [http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Like\\_Moses/like\\_moses.html](http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Like_Moses/like_moses.html)).

<sup>ii</sup> Alyce McKenzie, “Have a Blessed Day! Reflections on Matthew 5:1-12” (from the Patheos website: <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Blessed-Day-Alyce-McKenzie-01-27-2014>).