

Message by Rev. Joyce Yanishewski

St. Andrew's Presbyterian, Thunder Bay, ON

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Matthew 4:23-5:12

Blessed?

Last week Saturday I sat with the news that another person, Alex Pretti, had been killed by ICE agents on the streets of Minneapolis. The release of a song by Bruce Springsteen that dropped three days ago is keeping all this injustice in the forefront. He is making sure that the harm being done is kept in our hearts and minds. This is important as the craziness of this world is easy to forget as we get on with our everyday and newsfeeds bring another story another day. But for thousands living in fear, they cannot forget.

Then this Saturday I sat and tried to digest what had so far been revealed in the Jeffrey Epstein files.

Now I know this is not news about our own country, but if we think for a moment that we are immune to what is going on with our neighbours to the south then we are living in a bubble. Our world has become far to globally aware and connected for us to think that what happens somewhere else is not going to have ripple effects here, and even if these things are happening elsewhere, as God's people we are called to pray for healing for the nations.

Thing is, these things are not far away. For myself, as someone who has experienced sexual trauma, reading just one excerpt of what had been released in the Epstein files was a trigger for me. Now for those of you who are unaware, there are stories of girls as young as thirteen being checked to see how tight their vaginas were and there are more horrors. The files seem to indicate that authorities don't even know what has happened to some of the girls. Sound familiar?

Here in our own country, we have documented stories of murdered and missing indigenous women. Again, we are not immune. We, like so many others, are not directly affected so we hear the story and get on with our day, but those who have been affected are daily reminded of their own horror and loss. Loss of virginity, loss of dignity, loss of life. Be aware that though the large majority of those affected by these kinds of things are women, there are men who have their own stories.

Now, before I go on, I want to look at the scripture and then hopefully tie this all together in ways that make sense. Even as I write this though, I know that there is no making sense of what happens to people in this world. The one most often asked question for people as they witness or hear about the horrible and difficult things in the world is, "Where is God in this?"

If there is a God, where is God in this?

I suspect to some extent we will all go to our graves with this question. But in these troubling times, as with time throughout the ages, it is helpful to actually look for God in this. And that is where what we have come to know as the Beatitudes comes in. It is also helpful to put these words in their context. Hear about the context of these words from the scripture itself.

23-25 From there [Jesus] went all over Galilee. He used synagogues for meeting places and taught people the truth of God. God's kingdom was his theme—that beginning right now they were under God's government, a good government! He also healed people of their diseases and of the bad effects of their bad lives. Word got around the entire Roman province of Syria. People brought anybody with a sickness, whether mental, emotional, or physical. Jesus healed them, one and all. More and more people came, the momentum gathering. Besides those from Galilee, crowds came from the "Ten Towns" across the lake, others up from Jerusalem and Judea, still others from across the Jordan.¹

This is the context of the next statements about blessing. People were bringing anyone, anybody, with a sickness to Jesus and he healed them, but this was within the framework of telling them about God's kingdom, a kingdom under God's rule, and in the background was the Roman Empire. All of this is the setting in which Jesus was teaching and preaching about another way of living in the world.

Of course, we know that Jesus is no longer physically with us, so for the most part, we don't see that kind of healing, but it does not mean that healing does not happen. Also, many times our pain and suffering do end in death, but what that means is that we are freed from the earthly bonds of sorrow, sickness, and death, and get to be with God in another way where those things are no more. (Rev 21:4)

Still, there is much healing that can take place for us. It is what we are called to as we in this church look at our mission statement of responding, restoring, and rejoicing. This is all about bringing healing and wholeness to those we encounter whether they be together with us in worship, in our families, in the community, or much more broadly into the world.

Getting back to the words of blessing from scripture...it hardly seems like blessing.
³ "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. ⁴ "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. What kind of blessing is that. Blessed? It doesn't feel like blessing.

Now, if I were to read the rest of the blessings to you from say the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the next verses would seem even harsher, but taken

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture references taken from [The Message \(MSG\)](#) Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

from The Message as we heard it read helps us to see where God truly is and why this is blessing. You can go back to verses three and four to read how those things are blessings, but to continue at verse five...

5 “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.

6 “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.

7 “You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.

8 “You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

9 “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.

10 “You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.²

It becomes what it always has been about...relationship...first of all with God and then relationship with each other.

First relationship with God. We know from this scripture and so many more that God is with those who suffer. When you ask, “Where is God in this?” Look to those who are suffering. God’s heart is for those who are in need. Jesus came to those who were suffering. He healed them. He taught them. And then he said to those who would listen then and now, continue my work. Continue to be with those who are suffering, those in need, those whose hearts, minds, and/or bodies are broken. And do more if you can. Do something if it will bring the kingdom of God on earth.

The world has always had suffering, but there are people who have made a difference. Think of the Civil Rights movement in the US, or Apartheid in South Africa, or the

² Ibid.

Suffragettes who fought for the right of women to vote. Peaceful protests that often turned ugly when the power of the government came down to bear on them.

Today we hear people say that those who have been arrested, injured, or shot dead should not have gotten in the way. But when harm is being done to those who have no voice and no power, peaceful protest has always been the way of people and God's people in particular. We are not called to sit in our comfortable spaces in the face of injustice. We are called to action.

In the words of the prophet Micah of the Old Testament, "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."³

This is what we are called to, which is what the last verses of the scripture on blessing talks about as it says...

"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."⁴

My prophets and witnesses have always gotten in this kind of trouble. And Micah again, "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."⁵

So, we are blessed...blessed to be agents of God in the world. Blessed to know God in our lives. Blessed to have God living and working in and through us to bring the kingdom of heaven on earth. We are blessed when we care for those who need to be lifted up. We are blessed when we recognize God's provision and presence. We are blessed when we know to our core that we are loved by God and never alone.

Does this answer everything? No. But it is about faith, mature faith, courage, love and justice. It is about showing up, speaking up, and doing what we can. It is about responding, restoring, and rejoicing. May God grant us the wisdom, courage, and humility to be salt and light of the world. Amen.

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⁴ The Message. Eugene Peterson.

⁵ NRSV.