

Matthew 5 1-12

Some time ago one of the newspapers did a survey. It must have been a low day for news, because the paper filled a whole page with a survey they had done amongst their readers. The readers were asked, "What character trait do you most value in another person?"

People were asked to give one word describing the character trait they most value in other people. Well, the list was very long. It had everything from integrity, courage, honesty, charity, compassion, commitment, character, caring, non judgemental, humility, friendliness, generosity, and on and on it went right to being able to say I am sorry. Apparently, to make money and to be good looking did not make it on the list.

Two words were on top of the list as most mentioned. They far outnumbered all the others. One was honesty and the other was integrity. Honesty and integrity were the two most valued character traits by far according to the survey of newspaper readers. And you could well argue that many of the other words used by people were closely related to honesty and integrity.

I found that very interesting. because when I browsed through the rest of the paper, and watched the news, it seemed that most of what I read had very little to do with honesty and integrity. And even when it was used, I had grave doubts whether we could really trust those who were trying so hard to prove their honesty.

So what is going on? Are the newspapers and the news so far out of touch that they do not have a grasp of what we really value in others? Or have we really lost our sense of what we value in people, and have we started to accept that honesty and integrity are too much to expect from people?

The story in Matthew we read today is about the first sermon Jesus preached. The sermon, I think, is about what God values in our character. It is as if Jesus is asked what does God call most important in our character. Does it have to do with honesty and integrity, or does it have to do with success and getting rich and looking good.

After being baptized by John the Baptist and having spent 40 days in the desert to battle the devil, Jesus calls his disciples for a first lesson. He gives his first sermon. The sermon is called the Sermon on the Mount because the place where Jesus gave this sermon was on a hillside. It was a quiet place by the lake, the sea of Galilee. It was on a slope towards the hills in Galilee. A great place to sit down and meditate.

We were there several years ago on our trip to Egypt and Israel. The property around the Sea of Galilee is owned by the church; therefore there has been no development and it is still pretty much the way it was when Jesus preached his sermon there. We were told that the acoustics in that place are excellent. Someone speaking by the water could be heard clearly by everyone sitting on the slopes of the hill side.

Matthew tells us that Jesus sat down. Why does he tell us that? That is what rabbis did. That is how they taught. They sat down somewhere and people or students would gather around them. Paul tells us that he sat at the feet of Gamaliel, a well-known teacher in his days. That is how Jesus teaches his first lesson.

What is Jesus' first lesson about? We call the first lesson, the beatitudes. It is a lesson about how to lead a blessed life. Some people have translated the word for blessed as happy. How to lead a happy life. But I think that is not the same. Being blessed is more than being happy. Being happy is a feeling; it is subjective. And we all know that feelings come and go and they usually don't last. Being blessed on the other hand is a condition, an attitude. Being blessed does not describe how we feel, it describes our relationship with God. Being blessed is a deep-down sense of security. It means that we can say, whatever happens in my life, it is well with my soul. It is the security of knowing that God loves us and will never leave us. It is much deeper than being happy.

You can understand the difference between blessed and happy when you look at the opposites.

The opposite of being happy is being unhappy or sad. The opposite of being blessed is being cursed. It is the difference between a life with God or a life without God. Being cursed means that you have turned your back to God and therefore you are not part of the kingdom of God.

To lead a blessed life is to live the way God intended it. It is to live as being part of the kingdom of God. So how can we live this life? What are the characteristics for leading a blessed life?

Let us listen to what Jesus has to say. He starts with, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This is not about being poor in money. Being poor in spirit means that you look at your self and you realize that you cannot do it on your own. You realize that you need God in your life.

Today we teach our kids to be self reliant and independent. We teach them: rely on your skills, your brains. That way you can stay ahead of the game. That way you can be independent. After all the only one you can rely on is yourself, is it not? We value independence, not dependence. That is what we teach our children, but that is not what Jesus teaches us. He teaches us to rely on God. That is the opposite of what our society teaches us is not it? Rely on God instead of on your self alone, says Jesus. Then you will have a blessed life.

The Second rule Jesus teaches us is that we are blessed when we mourn, for then you will be comforted. That sounds strange. How can you be blessed if you mourn? Does not mourning have to do with being sad? Yes, it does. But what are we sad about? To realize that we are poor in spirit and that we need to be dependent on God is only the start.

We need to take a look at ourselves. Look inside ourselves. What do you see? Well you may say, nothing to be sad about. You may say I am a good person. I have never been in trouble with the law. I am sure that is true. But how about God's law?. How about the law that says that we are to love God with all our hearts, our minds, and souls and that we are to love our neighbours as ourselves.

When you look deep inside you, do you see anger at someone who has hurt you? Do you see a desire to get even? Do you see jealousy at someone more successful than you? Does it make you sad to see all that? It is only when you mourn over it, says Jesus, that I will be able to comfort you.

Some time ago I talked about being blessed when we mourn, with a group of seniors at Lakeshore Lodge, a long-term care facility where Lynne was the chaplain. When I had explained this, a ninety-year-old Jewish man got up, took his walker and walked out of the room. Afterwards I went to his room and asked if there was anything I had said that had upset him.

He said, "No, what you said was right on. But it is what I have seen inside me that has upset me. As a young man I have done something very hurtful to my sister and it has been a strain on our relationship ever since. I have to go and get hold of my sister, while I still can. He was mourning what he saw. It is only when you mourn, says Jesus, that I can put my arms around you and comfort you.

Third rule is that God blesses those who are humble or meek for they will inherit the earth. Now I must admit that have never put being humble or meek on my resume. In fact when I applied for a job as a manager, I tried to show that I was the opposite. I tried to show that I was assertive and strong. I did not think that they were looking for a humble or meek manager. Being humble or meek is not seen as a sign of success, is it?

Yet Jesus says, blessed are those who are humble or meek. What does he mean? First of all, being meek does not mean weak. That is what we often think. Rather, It is a sign of inner strength and control. It means that you do not take revenge when someone has hurt you. It means not getting even. Not getting caught up in a world where it is every man and woman for themselves. That takes a lot of inner strength and self control.

I am told that the Greek word translated as meek in this passage, is the same word used for stallions trained for battle. It is strength that is controlled. Being gentle, considerate, and courteous even when you feel like lashing out and getting even - that is being meek, but that takes a lot of strength. That is when God will bless you and you will inherit the earth, for that is the way God intended us to be.

The fourth rule is that God blesses us when we hunger and thirst for righteousness. I think that there are two different kinds of righteousness in the bible. There is legal righteousness. That is what Jesus has achieved for us on the cross. Through his death on the cross, Jesus has made us righteous before God. But there is also moral righteousness. That is what is going on in our hearts and minds. That is wanting to do what is right, for

it is doing what God wants us to do. We need to hunger for doing what we know deep down is right, for ourselves and for our communities. When we do that we will be blessed.

The fifth rule is that God blesses us when we are merciful, for then God will show us mercy. Now Jesus focuses on how we are to treat others. Mercy is compassion for others that is the compass that will steer us in the direction God wants us to go.

Years ago, the Dalai Lama was in Canada. He was all over the news, and special programs were dedicated to him and his teachings. A lot of attention was given to his message. He said this: "I believe that at every level of society, familial, tribal, national and international, the key to a happier and more successful world is the growth of compassion." Our purpose in life is to be happy, says the Dalai Lama, and the way we can find happiness is through the practice of compassion, acceptance, forgiveness and love. He could have said that God blesses those who are merciful, for then we will receive mercy. That is what Jesus teaches us.

The sixth rule is that God blesses us when our hearts are pure. When we follow the rules Jesus has given us it will affect our hearts. Our inner being, our character changes. We are sincere, people know that we can be trusted. We have integrity. We are also true to ourselves. We have inner security. We are not being offended all the time. Is it not interesting that the most used word to describe the character trait we most value in other people according to the survey in the paper, was integrity and honesty. But is not this exactly what Jesus teaches us?

The seventh rule is that God will bless us when we are peacemakers, or work for peace. When we have followed the rules Jesus has given us, it will have an impact on those around us. Our attitude will be changed. Our attitude towards others will have changed. Rather than join the competitive rat race of winners and losers, we will make peace with each other. Making peace with each other does not mean peace at all costs and giving up what we believe in. It means, as it says in the letter to the Hebrews, that we are to make every effort to live in peace with each other.

When we follow the rules Jesus has given us, he promises us that we will lead a blessed life. But Jesus also warns us. He warns us that when we live as Jesus teaches us we go against everything the world teaches us. We

go against every man and women for themselves. We go against what we see and hear about in the papers. Following Jesus is the exact opposite of what we see in the world around us. It is the opposite of what the world teaches us. It is the opposite of what we hear on the news and see on TV.

Is that why the world does not like Christians and persecutes them in many parts of the world? Is it because we do not play by their rules? We do not get even. We do not get ahead of the other. We do not put ourselves first, but we put God first. Is it because they can not control us, because we are controlled by what Jesus teaches us? Jesus says when you follow my teachings, be prepared that "they will persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you".

"But", says Jesus, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for your reward is in heaven. And remember you are not alone. They have persecuted the prophets who were before you, too."

I think that the people answering the newspaper survey about what they valued most in others, were right when they put honesty and integrity on top of the list. Because that is what Jesus teaches us in the sermon on the mount. But it is more than that. It is living a life where we put God first. It is a blessed life that gives us the inner security that whatever may happen in our lives, it is well with my soul.

I like the way Eugene Peterson has translated the Beatitudes in his paraphrase of the bible called "The Message."

He says *"You are blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and his rule.*

*You are 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 are blessed when you are content with just who you are. No more and no less. That is when you find yourselves the proud owners of everything that can not be bought.*

*You are blessed when you have worked up a good appetite for God. He is food and drink in the best meal you will ever eat.*

*You are blessed when you care. At the moment of being care-full you find yourselves cared-for.*

*You are blessed when you get your inside world - your mind and heart-put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.*

*You are blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That is when you discover who you really are and your place in Gods family.*

*You are blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you 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, for though they don't like it, I do. And all heaven applauds.*

Now to him who can do immeasurably more than all we can imagine or ask for, to Him be the glory and power for ever.