

4 Epiphany
January 29, 2023
THE FACE OF CHRIST

A sermon Based on Matthew 5:1-12
Sermon by Rev. Jerry LiaBraaten

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.**

Once again I'd like to begin my sermon by asking you two questions. The first question is this: "How do you like your eggs?" (Responses from the congregation included...poached, over easy, with cheese, properly cooked, an omlet, over medium.) The second question is, "When somebody makes you a promise, what does that mean to you? (Responses include...that they will keep it, that I can depend on it, that it's a two way street...the trusted must also be the trustee...it's a commitment...that they're a good friend."

You've probably heard the saying, "Once you turn forty, your face is your fault." The first time I heard that I was at a party, a birthday party, mine. I was turning forty. Now, knowing this, I'm guessing that at some point today at least a few of you will go into the bathroom, close the door, and take a good look at your face. The meaning of these words is pretty obvious...that our face is an outward expression of what's going on on the inside. Do we permanently wear a scowl or a look of joy...anger or anguish...or any number of other expressions.

Today we visit a section of Matthew called the beatitudes. We're told Jesus was looking out at a large crowd of people when he spoke them. He probably saw every possible expression on those faces? Who were those people? What we know of first century Middle Eastern history and anthropology is that it was a very difficult time to be alive, especially if you were located somewhere on the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder as most of his listeners probably were. They lived at a time when life expectancy was somewhere around 40-45 years old, a time when disease was rampant, infant mortality was extremely high, and food insecurity was something that virtually everyone experienced--all of this while experiencing persecution from an oppressive foreign regime.

But look who's talking! Jesus. We recently revisited the story of his baptism, a baptism in which he must have felt so blessed...and blessed so...so that he could come at life from love...love from above...no matter what the circumstances. Duns Scotus, the 13th century Scottish mystic wrote, "Sin is not the reason for Jesus, love is." In other words, the people who heard those beatitudes for the very first time, were looking into the face of love.

We can look at the beatitudes as promises that Jesus made to the crowd that day. And, as you said so well earlier, when someone makes a promise to us, they make a commitment to us, one we trust they will keep. One of the ways we can look at each of the first six statements ("Blessed are the poor in

spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful, and those who are peacemakers...) is that in each Jesus makes a promise.

Now when it comes to promises, we can focus our attention in either of two very different directions. One direction is all about the future. Here Jesus makes promises in order to give the people hope, something to sustain them through the difficulties of their current lives by offering a fulfillment, a reward, a wonderful eternity on the other end. That's well and good, of course. But if we put our primary focus there, it does nothing to change the present, does it? And if nothing changes, nothing changes. It just means getting through the present. It means coping. It may even mean going along with the present. What it doesn't mean is changing the present.

Alternatively, we can look at the beatitudes in the direction of the beginning of each of them...the "Blessed..." Here it's as if Jesus said these words in order to empower them for that very moment and every moment forward. After all, that's why we make promises in the first place, isn't it? To alter someone's current reality through the promise of a different one in the future? Here in lies both the purpose and the power of a promise. The very reason we make them is for the sake of the effect they will have upon the current moment. A promise is nothing if it's not for right now...and therein lies its power...to change us...and through us, change the world and its the future. You see, if we believe in the promises within these beatitudes it changes how we see the world and it changes how we act in this world. It changes our world because it changes us. It changes who we are.

After these first six statements Jesus' tone changes. It gets personal. He says, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of falsehoods against you on my account," as if to warn us about what we, his followers, might get ourselves into. But wait, there's more! In the last statement he says, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

"Rejoice and be glad?!" REJOICE AND BE GLAD?! How could anyone possibly rejoice and be glad under the conditions in which they found themselves living? Ah, but we can...if we take Jesus at his promises so that their power can empower us to rise to the day. Thich Naht Hahn, the late Vietnamese monk and mystic, said, "If in your daily life you can smile, if you can be peaceful and happy, then not only you, but everyone else will profit, for this is the very basic kind of peace work." In other words, something as simple as a smile can change the world. We can all start there.

Here I find Jesus' words are incredibly powerful and compelling. He's saying it's not up to us to somehow make ourselves happy or peaceable. It *is up to us*, however, to believe him...to believe in his promises.

When I was in seventh grade a substitute teacher came into our classroom one day. She was quite elderly. Judging by her face, I'd say she was at least forty. Unfortunately, she had poor eyesight and so wore very thick lenses in her glasses. It made it a bit difficult to ascertain exactly where she was looking. Half way through class, she was sitting at her desk while we were completing a reading assignment when the kid two or three desks ahead of me did something that got her attention. She didn't like it and said something to him. About that time, I nudged a friend next to me. I didn't want

him to miss out on any of the fun. At this point she got up from her seat and walked over to the troublemaker. But wait a minute. She passed him and kept coming down the aisle until she got to me. Not good.

Now I wish I could tell you this story had a happy ending. It did not. In fact, this little incident earned me a ticket to the principal's office and a subsequent phone call home. But even that wasn't the worst of it. Now, as far as the principal was concerned, I was a 'person of interest.' I was in seventh grade! I hadn't gone through puberty yet! My voice was still somewhere up there in the rafters...but I was a person of interest! I was somebody to be watched. I was suspect.

If we look at how the world views the church today, it seems a lot of people feel that same way. They are watching the church--and I would have to say...with good reason--because it *is* suspect. In short, the church has egg on its face. Maya Angelou said, "I have learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." That's where the world is coming from when looking at the Christianity. We're not making it feel very good.

The Pew Research Center, an organization that conducts surveys on a wide range of topics about American life, reports that 15 years ago some 78% of Americans identified themselves as Christian. In which direction do you think that statistic has gone since then? Down? Yes! Now it's 63%. Just last week they came out with a new report, this one on the future of Christianity. It says that between now and 2070 some 31% more Americans will drop that Christian identification when describing themselves..but another 21% within other sectors of the church will claim it. An equally interesting fact is this: In our newly elected congress, fully 88% of the members identify with being Christian. That's far above the percentage of Americans who do so! What does that bode? And Christian, yes...but what kind of Christian? What is the face of *that* Christianity!

That Christianity is evolving is not a bad thing, right? It's a necessary thing. But like all of evolution, it's not all going to go in one "right" or correct way, is it? The good news here is that we, you and I as individuals, have the opportunity to shape the face that the world sees...along the lines of what Maya Angelou said...by its experience of us...one by one by one.

Why *did* Jesus say these particular beatitudes--on this particular occasion? He could have said anything, right? But he chose *these* words. Why? Because he knew the people needed to hear *these* words of promise right then and right there. And frankly, have things changed all that much? Do we need to hear them any less than they did? No. Perhaps even more. We need to remind ourselves and each other of them again and again and again.

And the world, the world needs to know that we're committed. That we're all in. The only way we can accomplish that is if we truly take Jesus at his word--if we believe what we read in Hebrews 11... "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." *Faith* means believing in these promises for the sake of the world right here, right now.

Finally, and this may sound a bit radical to some of you, ultimately, we are not here to be the face of Christianity. We're here to be the face...of Christ.