



First United Church of Oak Park

Blessed

Matthew 4:23 - 5:10

The Rev. Dr. Deborah Kapp

January 7, 2018

Every week in our staff meeting here at First United, we read aloud the pink prayer cards that people offer in worship. We remind ourselves of who might need a pastoral visit and make sure someone takes responsibility for that. We make a list of people who should receive PAL notes. Sometimes, the prayer cards announce something that we did not know about - a death, or someone's surgery, or somebody else's new job - and we follow up as appropriate. But that's rare, because most of the cards are offered anonymously, without a name or identifying handwriting, so we don't really know who is on the other end of them. We are, however, confident that God knows who these people are, even if we don't, and we are even more confident that God holds them close. We pray for everybody, known or unknown, joyful or concerned, and we are grateful for the privilege of praying with and for you.

Last week, we were caught a little bit off guard by a poignant, anonymous prayer request. Someone asked us to pray for "my broken heart; my broken life." Although this is not typical of our weekly prayer requests at First United, it is a prayer that is not unfamiliar to our God.

Today's text opens with a description of Jesus' ministry among those with broken lives and hearts. Matthew reports that in the first days and weeks of his ministry, just after he's called the first four disciples, Jesus goes through Galilee teaching and healing. When people hear of his compassionate power, the broken people of Galilee and their loved ones flock to him.

Who comes? Those tortured and tormented with pain. We know something about pain from the stories we hear on the news about the opioid crisis. These stories report that pain itself, unchecked, can derail a life. People seek out drugs because they want to stop the pain; they want to go to work and live their lives; they want to feel normal again. Who can blame them? About a quarter of the adult population in the US lives with chronic pain - many in our congregation may be part of that group.¹ I have no idea how our statistics might compare to those in first century Galilee, but I'm sure that there were many people who suffered endless pain. I am more sure that there were few, if any, medical options for pain relief. I can imagine the unmedicated, untreated pain that drives people to Jesus.

People afflicted with mental illness come to Jesus. Matthew calls them "demon-possessed," and that phrase alone helps us understand the degree to which those dear souls were stigmatized in their culture even more than those with mental illness are in ours. In twenty centuries, we have not learned nearly as much as we need to learn about how to help the people and families who cope daily with mental illness. Our privileged culture has too few resources, too little expertise, and too little political conviction to deal as well with these challenges as we should. The people of Jesus' time had fewer resources than we do. People with lives broken by mental illness turn to Jesus.

¹ Statistics used in this sermon are drawn from several sources on the web, including the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institute of Health, and the Kaiser Family Foundation.

People with mobility challenges turn to him, too. Matthew tells us that the lame and the paralyzed come for respite, hoping to be made whole, to be able to move about as God created them to do. Some of these people might have been born with constricted mobility; perhaps they have clubbed feet. Perhaps they are accident survivors or have worked in a job that took its toll on their bodies. Maybe they had a broken leg years ago that did not heal correctly. Whatever the cause, they are physically immobilized or constrained in a culture with few chiropractic or orthopedic resources. Friends carry them to Jesus. Family members support them as they hop on one leg. They come to Jesus to have their half-broken bodies made whole.

People with epilepsy come, too. Matthew's word for this group of people is an odd one, perhaps a euphemism: he calls them "moon-struck." The first century obviously did not have scientific language for this malady, and it certainly lacked a medical solution. First century people who suffered with epilepsy must have been fearful about when or where their next seizure might occur; perhaps they also feared its consequences. People whose hearts and lives are broken with epilepsy seek out Jesus.

Matthew uses an interesting word to characterize this whole group that gathers around Jesus: the pain-filled, those challenged by mental illness, the immobilized and constrained, the seizure prone. He uses a word that can sometimes mean "sick." But it can also mean "abused" or "mistreated." That alternate translation raises some interesting questions for me. Are we to understand that the people Matthew describes are mistreated or abused, due to their physical and mental conditions? That may well be true; in the first century people understood illness of any sort to be a consequence of sin, so it's likely that the people Matthew describes are isolated spiritually and socially, as well as physically.

But it's also possible that there is yet another group that comes to Jesus as he ministers - those who have been abused in other ways: beaten behind closed doors, bullied, sexually abused. Their wounds may be invisible to their friends and family, but they are wounds nonetheless.

Pray for my broken life, my broken heart. Then and now, we come to Jesus with heavy loads.
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.

This text gives us a glimpse into God's heart.

Jesus speaks about people on whom the world has turned its back: people who are weighed down by poverty and loss, people who are not very good at standing up for themselves, and people who find themselves again and again on the short end of the stick. These are the folks who are left behind when those of us who are healthier, or richer, or better-connected just move on with our lives. Like the priest and the Levite who pass by the man beaten and left to die on the side of the road, we keep going; on our worst days, we see the people of whom this text speaks only in our rearview mirrors.

Of course, it's never quite that simple. Each of us is a little bit broken and a little bit whole. We spend a lot of time trying to cover over the broken bits or trying to leave those parts of ourselves behind us.

But God in the person of Jesus Christ does not overlook or cover over what's painful or abused. He sees and remembers the people with the most broken of lives. He stops and cares for those with the most broken of

hearts. That Jesus sees this brokenness, and embraces those burdened by it, and remembers them, is a blessing. That's not to say that Jesus fixes everything and makes everybody's life swell - we all know it doesn't work that way. But the working of God's grace is a mystery, and God's love embodied in Jesus' words and actions can manifest itself in the most broken of places.

This text gives us a glimpse into God's heart.

In it, we see God's compassion. But we also see in it God's impatience, for God is not content for the world to be a place that turns its back on the broken-hearted. So it is not just the broken people of the world whom Jesus deems blessed; it is also those who labor to redeem the world and its people.

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.

Last fall, Bob Haisman wrote an evotional for us in which he said that he had witnessed the presence of Jesus in the food pantry when he was volunteering. When I first opened his reflections and began to read, I anticipated that he would be channeling Matthew 25, and that he would say that he witnessed Jesus in the persons who were coming for food. You know, "as much as you have done it for the least of these, you have done it to me." And that would have been a great and appropriate reflection.

But that wasn't Bob's testimony. Instead of focusing on the clientele of the food pantry as being blessed, Bob focused on the volunteers, on the people who had offered precious time and energy to help somebody else. It was in those folks that he witnessed the blessed presence of Jesus. Bob witnessed in that evotional to the truth of these beatitudes: In efforts to be merciful, to seek peace, to make justice, people discover blessing.

The emphasis here should be on the word "discover." Beatitude blessings cannot be manufactured; joy in the Christian life is not found in a strategic plan. If we volunteer with the specific purpose of feeling blessed, it will likely backfire with resentment and frustration. If we demand immediate comfort in the midst of our mourning, we may be disappointed. The graciousness of God's presence and the bounty of God's blessing surprise us when we least expect them. We are called not to orchestrate our blessings - we are called to follow Jesus. That's the point. He invites us to change our lives, to change the world, and follow him. Who knows what blessings will be ours if we join his journey?