

January 29 30, 2011
4th Sunday after Epiphany
Micah 6:1 – 8
Matthew 5:1 – 12

In a supermarket, Kurtis the stock boy, was busy working when a new voice came over the loudspeaker asking for a carry out at register 4. Kurtis was almost finished unpacking a box and wanted to get some fresh air, so decided to answer the call. As he approached the check-out stand a smile caught his eye. The new check out girl was beautiful. She looked a bit older. Turns out she was 26, and he was 22. He says that for him, it was love at first sight.

Later that day, after his shift was over, he waited by the time clock to find out her name. She came into the break room, smiled at him politely, took her card, punched out, and left. Brenda. That was her name. He walked outside only to see her start walking up the road. The next day he waited outside as she left the store and offered her a ride home. He looked harmless enough, she thought, so she accepted. When he dropped her off, he asked if maybe he could see her again, outside of work. She said it simply wasn't possible. He asked again and she explained she had two children and she couldn't afford a baby-sitter. So he offered to pay for the baby-sitter. Reluctantly she accepted his offer for a date for the following Saturday.

That Saturday night he arrived at her door only to have her tell him that she couldn't go out because the baby-sitter had called and cancelled. To which Kurtis simply said, "Well, let's take the kids with us." She tried to explain that taking the children was not an option, but again not taking "no" for an answer, Kurtis insisted. Finally Brenda brought him inside to meet her children. She had an older daughter and a son, in a wheelchair. He was born a paraplegic with Down's syndrome. Kurtis only response was, "I still don't understand why the kids can't come with us?" Brenda was amazed. Most young men run from a woman with two kids, especially if one had disabilities. Just like her first husband and the father of her children had done.

That evening Kurtis and Brenda loaded up the kids, went to dinner and the movies. When her son needed anything, Kurtis took care of him. When he need to use the bathroom, Kurtis picked him up out of his chair, took him, brought him back. At the end of the evening, Brenda knew this was the man she was going to marry and spend the rest of her life with. A year later, they were married and Kurtis adopted both of her children. And they made five more.

So what happened to the grocery stock boy and check out girl? He became a legendary quarterback, Kurt Warner. He's no longer stocking grocery shelves. They give back in big ways to all kinds of church and civic causes. They are blessed.

The Kurt Warner story. We ooh and ahh at stories like those. Who'da thunk it? How amazing that she found the love of her life and a partner to help with parenting, let alone a decent man who made it big in professional football – a dream come true. That they both were and are faithful Christians. I tell the story because it's timely, with the Super Bowl next week, and because it makes the point of both the Hebrew Bible and gospel reading. It fits with today's readings because Micah and Jesus told us that we are called to do right, be kind, and walk humbly with God. And if we do that, we'll be blessed. We'll know that God is with us. But it's also the wrong story to tell, because it goes against the point that Jesus was trying to make in the beatitudes. Living a faithful life, as it seems Kurt and Brenda Warner did as a young people, and continued to do after his success, living a faithful life gives you no guarantee that you'll be successful by the world's standards, or that you'll avoid suffering. Even just knowing some of you for a short time, I could tell all kinds of stories that prove that wrong. Some of you are perfect examples of our misunderstanding of God's blessings. You've lived humble, faithful, kind lives, and yet you've known terrible tragedies – illnesses and accidents, jobs lost and even crimes against you. There are plenty of families who began like Kurtis and Brenda, and lived fulfilling lives together, and struggled financially, surviving tragedy, and yet still blessed by God.

Next Sunday is the Super Bowl. We know about all the great things the winning team will get, but what about the second place team, the losers of next week's game? Will they at least get cuff links or something? We don't usually hear about losing teams. Or about talented young men who didn't make the major league draft. In the Super Bowl and in much of our world, winning is all that counts. We love stories where the underdog comes from behind and wins. Lance Armstrong coming back after metastatic testicular cancer and winning how many Tour de France's. But that's just it, we only root for the underdog if he or she or they make it. We don't tell stories about a team that wasn't expected to win, and then didn't. Winning and success are too often all that count. And if you win from behind, like Brenda and Kurt Warner or Lance Armstrong, that makes winning all the better.

The beatitudes are stories about teams and people that weren't expected to win and then didn't. In the beatitudes Jesus isn't saying, blessed are the poor in spirit, for one day they'll be leading

motivational seminars. Or blessed are those who are persecuted, for the people who are persecuting them are going to get theirs, just you wait. Or blessed are the meek, for they'll be corporate CEO's in a year. But who needs a blessing if it doesn't get you anything? Well, except for the blessing part. Why did Jesus even bother, if there's nothing guaranteed? No security, or protection from tough times.

Let's go back to that blessing part. What does it mean to us? What did it mean to Jesus, to be blessed? Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. To be blessed is to be connected to, close to God. When we ask for God's blessing, we ask for God to become a part of something, to come near – to our new home, our marriage, our child, our search process. Jesus was telling the disciples, the crowd, and us, that despite what some Jewish leaders of his day said, and what the culture of our day often says – wealth, health, and success are not in and of themselves signs of God's presence, God's approval. By starting off his preaching ministry with the beatitudes Jesus is reminding his followers that God is available to, present with, offering strength to those who suffer. He was going back to what the psalms and prophets had said about God being with those whom society has forgotten or rejected.

In Matthew, the most Jewish of the gospels, Jesus in on the mountain to portray him as the new Moses. That sort of makes the beatitudes another version of the 10 commandments. In the beatitudes Jesus wanted to thumb his nose at his Jewish brothers and sisters who thought that wealth and purity and observing religious laws were what got you in good with God. So what did he say to his disciples and the crowds gathered? Pretty much the exact opposite. Blessed are you, God is with you, when you're faithful. And it's clear that Jesus knew that if you're really being faithful to God you'd be humble, meek. You'll know sorrow, because compassion opens your life to the grief of others. Each beatitude is about a way of living that requires us to be vulnerable, to put ourselves at risk for others. God calls us to be peacemakers, even when the world's default setting is to use power or violence or war to solve its conflicts. And in all of that, you will be blessed. God will hold you closely. It's a life-time guarantee for being close to God, for being a winner in God's eyes. Those who are faithful will see God. They will inherit the earth. They will be children of God. No guarantees to be protected from the tough times, only that God will be with us through them. No Super Bowl rings or big bonuses that you can take to the bank. No guarantees to marry the star quarterback. No guarantees for comfort and

security. A life-time guarantee on a roof or set of pots and pans gives you security that if something goes wrong, it will be fixed. The beatitudes only guarantees that if we live that way, we'll be pleasing God and have an incredible sense of peace, no matter what happens. And that's a pretty cool guarantee.

I read an ancient Chinese parable this week that shows us what trouble we get into when we try to find God's blessing in the events of our lives, instead of knowing it as a constant, something beyond the minor and major triumphs and tragedies. A farmer had one old horse that he used for tilling his fields. One day, the horse escaped into the hills, and when all of the farmer's neighbours heard about it, they sympathized with the old man over his bad luck. "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?" said the farmer. A week later, the horse returned with a herd of wild horses from the hills and this time the neighbours congratulated the farmer on his good luck. "Good luck? Bad Luck? Who knows?" said the farmer. When the farmer's son was attempting to tame one of the wild horses, he fell off its back and broke his leg. Everyone agreed that this was very bad luck. Not the farmer, who replied, "Good luck? Bad Luck? Who knows?" Some weeks later, the army marched into the village and forced every able bodied young man to go fight in a bloody war. When they saw that the farmer's son had a broken leg, they let him stay. Everyone was very happy at the farmer's good luck. "Good Luck. Bad Luck Who Knows?"

The farmer was right. And adding a Christian layer of understanding to that Chinese parable; we get into trouble if we begin attributing to God blessing or curse for the circumstances of our lives. "I've inherited a fortune. Must be God's blessing on me." "I've lost of fortune. Must be God's punishment of me." Neither is true. The beatitudes show us that whatever our circumstance, as God's people, we are called, in good times and tough, to find God, to stay connected to God. The beatitudes do give us a life-time guarantee. Not a guarantee for fame or wealth or freedom from tragedy or sickness or persecution, but for a way of living that is constant, that survives the tough things, rises above them, and that doesn't see the good things as reward from God. A way of living that finds God in every circumstance. In our journeys of faith, as individuals and as a church family, may we stay powerfully connected to God's love, God's blessing, in good times and in tough times. And because we are Jesus' followers, just as surely as those first disciples and that crowd were, these are his words for us today, so let them fall on your heart, so that you know you are loved and blessed by God.

"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.

"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.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Amen.