

5 1-2 When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:

3 “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

4 “You’re 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.

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.

11-12 “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.

13 “Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

14-16 “Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven. **-The Message**

When I was confirmed a long, long time ago it was a ritual after several months of classes. I believe I wrote and shared my first ever statement of faith. Every time previously that I have

Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.

taught confirmation I have worked with students over the course of many months to develop and profess their own statements of faith. Confirmation has been the moment when young people take responsibility for the promises made on their behalf in Baptism and profess Christian faith for themselves, or the moment when young people are Baptized and profess their faith in Christ. This year is different. We are using a curriculum that trusts that young people are already members of the church by virtue of their Baptisms and that they will make professions of faith when they are ready to do so and not on any calendar. It seeks to equip young people to be active in the mission of the church, using Matthew 25 as a guide. We shared 24 hours together already this weekend to lay a foundation for six more months of one on one exploration of what it means to serve Christ through the church's service of the world. And the young people who participated are in different places. Aubrey and Everett are not yet baptized and thus cannot be confirmed today and aren't quite ready for Baptism so we will bless Everett for his continued discernment and exploration. Sydney is still actively discerning and thus we are blessing her rather than confirming her today. Caroline is ready to affirm the promises made in her Baptism and be confirmed today. It is interesting that when we add adult members to the congregation we let their profession of faith be a shared act, they profess faith with the whole congregation. We assume that they will grow in their discipleship and commitment as time passes. We invite all members (and friends) to keep worshiping, learning, and serving and trust that the Spirit will bring growth in the process. We do not think that the life of faith is complete in Baptism, nor in Confirmation, nor in any ritual of membership. These moments are beginnings, or renewals, from which points lives of faith unfold.

Our Gospel reading today is one of the most famous in the Bible. It is the beginning of the first recorded sermon of Jesus, delivered in the early days of his ministry. When last we read from Matthew, a few weeks ago, we witnessed Jesus' Baptism. We skipped over his temptation in the wilderness and the calling of the first disciples (though we heard about that calling in last week's reading from John), and we skipped over his first acts of healing and compassion. When we pick up at the beginning of chapter five, Jesus has disciples and crowds are drawing near.

Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.

Obviously a lot has transpired in short order. If you go back and read Matthew chapter 4 this afternoon you'll see that when Jesus called the first disciples they responded immediately. They put their faith into action by dropping their nets, leaving their boats behind and going with this strange, new teacher. They weren't tested. They weren't asked to prove their worthiness. They didn't have to demonstrate some deep level of understanding. And when you read the whole of all four Gospels it is pretty clear they were deeply flawed human beings who didn't understand much of anything, most of the time. Or they'd get it one moment, only to lose it the next. Think about Peter, the rock on whom the church was built, over and over again... But they followed. And they joined Jesus in serving the needs of the world around him. And they listened to him. And they stood ready to receive the Spirit and be a church, a manifestation of Christ's body in the world after his resurrection and ascension. And we gather on Sunday mornings, and serve all week long, all a result of what got started in Galilee a long, long time ago. And how did it start? With a call from Jesus to humble people who were willing to follow.

I chose to read from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase translation *The Message* this week because the first sixteen verses of Matthew 5 are so familiar it helps to hear them in quite a different voice, and also because I think his paraphrase does some excellent interpretive work that can let the verses cut to our hearts without that much unpacking from me. It lets Jesus be the primary preacher today and I'm definitely ok with that. But before we take a closer look at Jesus' teaching as Peterson renders it, I'd like us to consider the set up. "When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions." What a lovely way to describe discipleship— apprenticeship, commitment, and climbing. If you're an apprentice then the presumption is that you have a lot to learn. The learning process requires commitment. And it will often feel like an uphill climb. The Spirit that descended upon Jesus in Baptism drove him into the wilderness where he fasted for 40 days and nights and then wrestled with deep and dangerous temptation. We know too that the overall arc of Jesus' ministry involved much conflict, struggle, and resistance— even as it

produced great crowds, healings, and transformed insight. Following Jesus does not mean escaping struggle and pain. And it will often feel like climbing a high mountain. But we're with Jesus whom we know to have been raised from the dead and to be the beloved Son of God whose teaching we can trust. And the suggestion in Matthew is that the teachings in this first, most famous sermon were intended for Jesus' climbing companions, for his apprentices, his committed disciples. When you get to the end of chapter 7, the end of the sermon, you see that the crowds overheard the teaching. And indeed we are overhearing it thousands of years later. But the teachings are intended for those who respond in faith and follow, as our confirmands are doing today—in different ways—as most of us have done once, or several times throughout our lives of faith.

So it's good to get this teaching today. It is foundational teaching for climbing companions of Jesus and that is what, I believe, we all are. And from the word go it is clear that Jesus' way of understanding is quite countercultural. Jesus suggests that a variety of circumstances that, according to earthly standards are cursed, are actually the site of God's blessing. Being at the end of your rope, losing that which is most dear to you, yearning with hunger for God, forsaking competition for collaboration, enduring persecution, mocked, judged, slandered, abused.... These are not circumstances we are inclined to see as blessed. But Jesus sees differently and invites his climbing companions to see differently too. Jesus sees that when we are hopeless, at the end of our rope, that is when we are finally ready to let God help us. Jesus sees that when we ache with grief, we can access the embrace of the loving God. Jesus sees that when we are mad about the godlessness of our world, our stomachs rumbling with hunger for change, we're ready to sit at God's table where the deepest hungers are fed. Jesus sees that when people who are in need of care and mercy show care and mercy to others, they get back the care and mercy they need. Jesus sees that rejecting the competitive, combative hierarchies of our world and choosing to model cooperation and collaboration, helps us rightly assess who we are and our place in God's family—and indeed to realize our shared humanity even with our enemies. Jesus sees that when the world rejects you for the faith you profess or the truth you speak, even though the rejection, persecution, abuse might be painful—it can be evidence

that you are on the right track, that others are reacting out of the discomfort that comes with truth, and indeed joy can come even in the struggle. Any of the circumstances Jesus describes can lead to depression, isolation, the loss of faith, but Jesus suggests that they need not. They can all draw us closer to God; if we let them.

I was reminded by Peterson's rendering of the Beatitudes, this beginning portion of the Sermon on the Mount, of the teaching I heard years ago, and have shared with you probably multiple times before, about true humility and true dependence. The speaker I heard said that true humility is agreeing with God about who God says you are; true dependence is agreeing with God about who God says God is. Who does God say we are? Beloved children, gifted and called to serve the world. Who does God say God is? Our creator, savior, and sustainer in whom we can trust and on whom we can depend in all circumstances. There's at least one Beatitude I haven't touched on yet and that's the one most translations call "pure hearts," but Peterson renders "You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world." In the ancient world hearts were thought to be the seat of understanding and behavior. Inside world is a good way to put it. We know that it is inside us that we can become convinced of dangerous lies— either that we are worthless or that we are the most important being that ever was, or sometimes both at the same time. I've heard it described in addiction circles as the idea that I'm the piece of poo that the world revolves around. This is NOT who God understands us to be. We are precious and beloved and gifted, and flawed, imperfect and finite humans utterly dependent on God— equal to all other humans. This is who God says we are. And it takes work to get our inside worlds aligned with this truth and understanding. And when we do manage to accept that we are God's beloved children gifted and equipped to meet the needs of the world, and that we are no better or worse than anyone else... we become aware of how present God is in this world and in the hearts of everyone we meet. And so much changes.

Jesus uses two metaphors to help his climbing companions appreciate who God says they are— they are salt and they are light. Salt, a seemingly tiny and insignificant mineral, but its presence enhances flavor, draws out the goodness of that to which it is added. Too much of it, a

problem. Too little, also a problem. Jesus with the Beatitudes suggests that his followers will be distinct in the world. They may be tempted to blend in to escape persecution, but they are meant to draw out the flavor of God in the world. And need, perhaps, to be a bit of an irritant to do so. And light— again where there might be a temptation to hide that which is shining from us, those particular gifts that make God's loving presence known to the world, we are called to shine, to be set up on a hilltop or table stand, helping others to find their way to faith in God. Humble and yet public and utterly essential— that's what I take from these two metaphors.

So to our confirmands and to all of us, we can count on the journey being long and hard, like a steep climb up a mountain. We can count on heartbreak and grief, on righteous anger at all that is broken in our world. We can count on violence and rejection and oppression. We can count on deep hunger and hard work. But more significantly, we can count on the steadfast love and presence and blessing of God in Christ by the Spirit. And all the hard stuff that will come our way, and dear confirmands we wish we could promise it won't, but we know that it will, all the hard stuff can be opportunities to turn to God in trust, to ask God for help, and to act in ways that demonstrate that trust to others. And, on our climb, we are never alone. We have one another and we have Jesus, our friend, our teacher, our savior. We're so glad to be climbing together.

Resource in addition to scripture cited in the writing of this sermon:

The insight on humility and dependence came from a speech on the story of Gideon in the Book of Judges, delivered by Danielle Strickland at the Global Leadership Summit hosted by Willow Creek in August of 2016. Danielle is an officer in the Salvation Army.