

God of blessing, open your Word to us today. Help us learn how to live it out, and to share it with others. Amen.

Last Thursday, in Bible study, I asked folks to share the things that they found to be most meaningful about a funeral or memorial service. We heard about the music and the meal, and other things that you would expect.

But the response that really stood out to me was the people.

Being around people who can support you in your grief is a necessary part of coming to terms with the loss of a loved one and figuring out how to move forward with your life.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

In the Lake Edge Lutheran community, we have experienced 9 deaths in the past 12 weeks. In addition to that, I know of several members who have lost parents or grandparents, in-laws or close friends... and that doesn't even get into the loss of health with a new diagnosis of illness, or the loss of a job or a home or a pet.

There has been a lot of mourning lately.

And there have been a lot of people showing up to comfort one another.

The Beatitudes, from the beginning of Matthew 5, can be very reassuring.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Of course, this doesn't mean that losing someone or something near to you is a good thing. Obviously Jesus is not saying that we should all go out and *try* to find ways to grieve, so that we will be able to receive God's blessing.

Jesus is referring to people who have already experienced a loss that is devastating to them, that they could not have prevented, and which is now causing them grief. Mourning isn't something that we seek out, it's a state in which we sometimes find ourselves.

Blessed are those who mourn.

This is such a hopeful word to those who find themselves in grief. And it is also a helpful instructional word for those who are not actively grieving – if you are not mourning, but you know someone who is, your job is to comfort them.

The second half of the sentence, "for they will be comforted," can be seen as a call to action. Going out and finding ways to comfort someone else is what we can do in response to their grief.

Jesus' words bring reassurance to some people, and they serve as a commissioning for others.

And where we fall in that equation – those who mourn or those who comfort – changes at various times in our lives. Sometimes we are the ones who grieve. And when we have experienced our own grief, and worked through it... when we have come to terms with our own loss, then we are prepared to help someone else work through theirs.

It's not that life goes back to normal, it's that our loss has been folded together with all the other life experiences that make us who we are. And, as a new person moving forward, we can recognize that we have, indeed, been blessed... and so we can go out and be a blessing for others.

For those of you who are grieving, I hope that you can enjoy the music, share the meals, re-live the memories, and most importantly, I hope that you are surrounded with people who can bring you comfort.

Grief doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens in a community, with other people there to help.

The same is true for all of the other values that Jesus lists in the Beatitudes.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

You can't be merciful unless you are in relationship with other people.

Mercy is defined as an act of kindness, compassion, or favor. It is the benevolence or forbearance shown toward an offender, an enemy, or another person in one's power.

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/mercy?s=t>

God is merciful to humanity. We haven't been perfect at following God's laws, and yet God loves us and welcomes us as beloved children anyway.

You and I can show mercy by helping someone in need, by advocating for people who are oppressed, and by forgiving other people.

Blessed are the merciful – showing mercy is something that each one of us has the ability to do – for they will receive mercy – when we find ourselves in need of grace from another person, Jesus promises that it will be there for us.

And even if we aren't shown mercy by other people every time we need it, we do know that God's mercy towards us is never ending.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

This is a powerful image. Jesus is saying, there are people out there who need righteousness just as much as they need food and water. He's not just talking

about people who think that righteousness is a good idea, and will work for it when they are able. These are people who *cannot live* until everyone in the world experiences righteousness.

What is righteousness, anyway?

Doesn't righteousness mean basically the same thing as justice, kindness, and humility?

Many of us would like to believe that we hunger and thirst for righteousness. We desperately want the world to be a fair place for all people.

But to hunger and thirst for righteousness? This requires constant work, constant activism, attention to every action we take, engagement with our neighbors at a deep level, and participation in society's systems of power that sometimes bring about justice and sometimes injustice.

If we are going to live our lives in the first half of this equation, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, it will take everything we've got.

But oh, will it be worth it!

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled!

Righteousness will be achieved! Justice and kindness will rule the world! It seems idealistic, maybe, but it's what Jesus promises will come about, someday.

The rest of the Beatitudes follow in a similar vein.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

These words can be comforting to people who are in distress. Jesus calls out the people who are on the bottom of society, who are often overlooked, and declares God's blessing upon them.

These words are also a call to action for people who are generally content with their place in society. Comfort those who mourn. Find ways to work for peace. Bring God's kingdom to people who are poor in spirit.

Recognize the people who are downtrodden, and help them realize that God's promises do, in fact, apply to them – perhaps even more than they apply to us.

The Beatitudes is one of many places in Scripture where we hear that God turns the existing world order on its head.

Think that money or reputation or political power is what matters in life?
Think again.

According to Jesus, what matters is caring for others, working for justice, and supporting people in need.

These verses from Matthew 5 are the beginning of Jesus' ministry in this Gospel – and his first action is to preach to the disciples who have just decided to follow him. He tells them exactly what they've gotten themselves into.

Don't think that you're going to gain power or prestige in this new gig.

Prepare yourself for persecution. We are in this to disrupt authority, not to gain it.

The Beatitudes declare a new world order, much like the Magnificat does in the Gospel of Luke. While Mary is pregnant with Jesus, she makes one of the most beautiful and bold declarations of faith recorded in Scripture:

God shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next.

God has shown strength,
scattering those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

God has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

God has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed. (Luke 1:50-53)

You get the idea. God is on the side of the oppressed.

It's like the prophet Micah wrote: our worship is important – we need to come together to learn about God and to grow our faith in community with others. But our worship becomes meaningless unless it is followed up by acts of justice, kindness, and humility, on behalf of other people.

God *cares* about how we spend our time and money. And God expects us to work on behalf of the people who have less power in society.

This is the vision put forth by Mary, and Jesus, and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Last October, Pope Francis clearly stated the importance of this vision:

“You cannot be a Christian without living like a Christian. You cannot be a Christian without practicing the Beatitudes. You cannot be a Christian without doing what Jesus teaches us in Matthew 25.”

Pope Francis, 10/13/16, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/10/13/pope-francis-you-cant-defend-christianity-by-being-against-refugees-and-other-religions/>

Matthew 25, of course, is that famous passage that tells us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned... for when we do these things for another person, we do it for Jesus himself.

This brings us back to the other point of these Beatitudes.

And all of these things happen in community.

Jesus calls us to work for justice, to comfort one another, to fight for the rights of people who are oppressed, to be kind to those who are fragile, to provide for the needs of people who can't provide for themselves.

At times we find ourselves in the role of the person needing to receive comfort – and at times we find ourselves doing the comforting. But wherever we find ourselves today, we know that Jesus is there. And Jesus is encouraging us to always do more, and to work for the day when the kingdom of God will really be present here on earth.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God.

Love one another.

Blessed are you.

Amen.