

Matthew 5:1-12 *Humble, Unguarded Faith*
First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, Alabama
February 2, 2020
The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

So, today we're looking back on this past year, which was my first year among you, and I have to say: we've been through some things this year, as a church. We've been through some things.

I look at our Micah passage—"What does God require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God"—and it sounds so straightforward, but if there's anything this last year has shown, it's that it isn't straightforward, at all. Sometimes we're faced with circumstances—like a couple of sticky personnel issues last year--in which it takes serious thought and prayer to discern exactly what *is* the just thing to do!

And kindness can be just as complicated. The Turquoise Table, for example, seemed like an unmitigated act of kindness and neighborliness—and it was. It led to some wonderful interactions. There are many of our neighbors whose names and stories I know only because I met them at the Turquoise Table. And then, the table devolved into a magnet for behaviors that were not kind, so it had to go away, for the sake of kindness and safety. Oof.

Which says to me that, if we want to be truly just and kind, then probably the most important of the three factors in Micah's trinity of ethics is the last one: humility. Walking humbly. Walking humbly, together, with God.

Jesus emphasizes the same thing in the Beatitudes, which we just read. His blessings fall on people who are humble, who are wounded by the world, who are longing for a righteousness that seems so elusive, who offer grace toward others, who work for peace, and who absorb the attacks that often land on those who try to change the world for the better. People, in other words, who have shed the hard exoskeleton of arrogance and ruthlessness and self-sufficiency that seems to be so admired these days. The people Jesus blesses are not cool and impervious, but wear their hearts on their sleeves, sharing their hurts and hopes openly.

I think that's why we're here: to try to create a community in which we can let down our guard and be uncool and uncertain, together. Where we can be human

together, in the best sense of that word, which has the same root as humility. There is blessing—deep blessing—in being fully and openly and humbly human together.

That blessing is evident here, in the way the Invitation and Integration team works to break down the barriers to welcome, like the new sign design—coming soon—to communicate more of who we are, and installing transgender bathroom signs and the pronoun buttons to let people know that this is a safe space.

It's in the way the deacons visit their people and show up to help whenever there's a funeral, so that the families are cared-for in their grief. It's in the willingness of so many of you to sign up, again and again, to cook and serve meals or spend the night at First Light. It's in the witness of the Mission, Justice, Service team when they write letters or meet with legislators to encourage voter rights restoration, even when it seems unlikely that the legislator will listen. It's in the new partnership that's formed with other faith communities so that we can be more thoughtful and effective in trying to end homelessness together.

It's in all the behind-the-scenes work of planning and recruiting and preparation that the Worship, Music, Arts Team does so that we can have meaningful worship, in their considerations of how to rearrange the seating in this space to create a stronger sense of community, and in the practice and rehearsals of our choir and musicians to help our spirits soar.

It's in the hours that the Property team spends cutting grass or painting windows or showing up to deal with the building emergency *du jour* so that we'll have a decent space in which to gather. It's in the number-parsing and careful considerations of the Administration and Finance Team to ensure that we're using our resources in line with our mission.

It's in the teachers who show up week after week to nurture the faith of our children and youth and adults; it's in the small groups and the classes where members don't have to pretend they have it all figured out; it's in the thoughtful opportunities for play and fellowship that Congregational Life puts together; it's in the open delight you could sense in this room when the children were presenting their Christmas pageant, and in the tears and beaming faces whenever a baby is baptized.

Last week, when the choir sang "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," I thought, yes: this is what church is. Because in the course of that anthem, every choir member had a solo or duet, which then blended into a small group, then into the whole choir singing the refrain together, then back to a solo. Each individual voice was welcomed and heard, and then, all the voices joined together to support one another and form a greater whole.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake—blessed are you, because here, in the presence of God, you can let your guard down. Here, you can be heard. You can join with others here, because we don't have it all figured out, either.

We're just trying to do justice. We're just trying to love kindness. We're just trying to walk humbly with God. The blessing is that we get to do it together, as human beings secure in our belovedness. Thanks be to God.