

Osler Mennonite Church  
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“The Beatitudes”  
**Matthew 5:1-12**  
**Micah 6:1-8**

Good morning everyone. Our scripture passage from Matthew focuses on the beatitudes - a litany pronouncing blessings upon what are apparently the lowliest of people. The poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, and those with the arduous task of peacemaking—all are blessed. The beatitudes are often referenced throughout Anabaptist teachings because of the counter-cultural vision Jesus presents for discipleship. A vision that redefines the meaning of what a “righteous person” is. This vision for the Kingdom of God provides a foundation for a more inclusive society, and shapes our understanding of peace and justice. **“Blessed are those who work for peace; they will be called children of God.”**

The scripture from Micah is often referenced in short - “and what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” Again, an invitation to live that puts love of neighbor and God at the center of our work and lives. This is counter to the belief in a more transactional relationship with God where offerings are given in return for a blessed life. Reading the Matthew and Micah texts together, we see a focus on the *journey* of learning what it means to walk a path with Jesus. One that will focus on love, peace, humility, and resilience. There is no promise of material rewards that will be given in return for a faithful life, but a promise that God is a God who will be close to us.

As I read the Beatitudes I was reminded that, if I lived in first-century Palestine, I probably wouldn't like Jesus. Or perhaps I would find him frustrating. We tend to prefer people we can read; either they tell us outright what they're thinking or their expressions do. We like it when people say what they mean and mean what they say. We tend to prefer people who are logical and draw understandable conclusions. Basically, we like people we can easily peg. One

thing you might know about me (or have observed), is that I tend to sometimes have a physical reaction to when somebody is sharing something with me - either with my face or body language will change. You can usually tell by an expression I make with my face. I don't always like that I do this, because typically it doesn't convey how I really feel. When everyone was wearing masks I was more lucky because I could hide my facial expression to some degree. I feel as though, if I was living during the time of Jesus, I would be listening to the Sermon on the Mount, and I probably tend to cross my eyebrows or squint my eyes while I would be listening to Jesus as I processed what he was talking about. Jesus was not predictable. He was not easy to read. He wasn't always logical, at least not by the norms of his culture.

In a culture that celebrated wealth and military strength, Jesus lifted up those on the opposite end of that spectrum as "blessed." And they were blessed, but not because they were particularly happy, and certainly not because they were without troubles. They were blessed because in a unique and profound way God was near to them.

A story I want to share with you this morning that I believe gets at the feeling of being near to God. This is about the ship *The Endurance*. In 1915, their ship, the Endurance, was sinking. After months of being trapped in the ice at the South Pole, the exploration ship was caught between growing ice sheets and was crushed. Sir Ernest Shackleton and his crew of 25 watched the ship go down. They had removed as many supplies as they could reach through ice water and darkness and now they stood on the ice, with 1600 kms of barren ice and almost 1100 kms of open sea between them and a far off whaling station on Elephant Island, which was the nearest human habitation. Shackleton was a 'self made' explorer, a man of humor, good will, and resilience. They had already survived ten months on the ice with the trapped ship. Now, with the ship gone, they began their journey with dog sleds. It took them five months to cross the ice, dragging Endurance's small lifeboats behind them. They hunted seals and penguins but eventually even those options became limited. Shackleton pushed his crew on and encouraged them. He gave essential work to men on the verge of giving up so that they would have some

reason to live, to keep going. The crew watched over each other. They invented careful rules for the handing out of food so that no one person got a scrap more than any other.

All of them survived to make it to the shore. There they built cabins out of the boats that they had towed, and looked after the weakest and sickest of the crew. Shackleton and five others in the best shape and with the most sea experience took some meager supplies and set out for the whaling station 1100 kms across icy seas. On that crossing of weeks, they were never dry. They lost all the feeling in their hands and feet. They ran so low on water that they could not eat, because they were so thirsty. When they finally reached Elephant Island, only three of them had the strength to cross a final mountain range full of glaciers, crevasses, and ice fields to reach the whaling station. They were delayed by storms, but they made it.

Shackleton recorded the journey in full, but he left one part out in his earliest publications of the story. As the three men journeyed across the mountains, at the very end, when all their strength and food were gone, Shackleton saw an extra man walking with them. He kept turning and clearly seeing three men walking with him, not two. The presence was so real that he would stop and count. Later, one of the other men hesitantly asked Shackleton if he saw the 'other man' who had walked with them. When the three men compared what they saw, they realized that all three of them had seen that quiet presence, walking beside them, keeping them company. Shackleton and the other men were reluctant to share the story in public later, but not out of fear of being called delusional or fools; rather, they said, the experience had felt holy, the presence too real and too important to treat as 'just another thing that happened' on this journey. All of them agreed that it was only the presence of that 'fourth person' that gave them the strength to keep on their feet and keep going the impossible distance to the whaling station. Whoever that person was, they were hope made manifest.

They made it. They came to the whaling station, starving and frozen. They went back with a ship to rescue the rest of the crew that they had left behind and found them all there, alive and waiting.

I like the Endurance story because it's about courage and people caring for each other. I also like the Endurance story because of the mystery of that fourth figure who walked with them at the very end - a presence they all felt, who gave them strength to keep going, who gave them hope. I believe that in this story, God was, in a unique and profound way, near to them.

We all have our own endurance stories. There are times where we want to mourn because it makes sense. Either it's the loss of a job, death of a loved one, or the end of a relationship. As lost as we feel when we mourn, or deal with grief, we are no farther from God than when things were more enjoyable. In fact, might God be even closer in those times? Might the blessing be that God does not leave us when we are at our worst? Might the blessing be to have a God that doesn't rush our grief but lets us weep? Aren't we blessed to have a God who doesn't tell us not to cry but says instead, "I'm here."

Now the assurance that God is "here" is not necessarily helpful either. It's sometimes hard to look over our shoulders, as Shekelton did, for that holy presence walking alongside us, which is where discipleship is important. The beatitudes are not about standing on the sidelines, doing nothing and waiting for God to fix our pain. In the Beatitudes, Jesus gives the blessing to those who, like the peacemakers, can offer that same love to others.

Can we as a community be that holy presence for those that need it? Is it not our role to embody who Jesus was and walk alongside our friends, neighbors, or maybe the stranger who reaches out to us for help. Can we be quiet with those who may be suffering here in our own church or family? Can we offer the comfort of saying "I'm here."

We are all on our own journeys with God - at different stages and comfort levels with how we understand Jesus' teachings. We all have our own endurance stories which oftentimes feel insurmountable. This weekend when I was at the SMYO retreat, we sang "The Mountain of God" which is written by Phil Campbell-Enns from Manitoba. When we sang it at the retreat I immediately texted Michelle that we had to sing it because it just fit so well with our focus this morning. The humble walk or journey with God feels like we are climbing a mountain. We are

called as disciples to walk that journey together and be a holy presence for each other along the way.

“New life awaits for all who believe, all who love mercy, do justice, walk humbly - with Christ as our guide, united we will be, living the Kingdom, secure in God’s peace. Come as you are, come near and far, come, salvation we will taste as we taste as we climb the mountain of God.” Amen.