

**Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany + January 29, 2017**  
**Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI**  
**Matthew 5:1-12**

Nancy Raabe, Pastor

My paternal grandmother, Frannie Miller, was quite a character. Flamboyant and outspoken, she told my brother and me to call her “Frannie” because “Grandma” made her feel old. In the 19-teens in New York City she was a champion on both the amateur bridge and tennis circuits. She smoked and drank, and outraged my Methodist maternal grandparents on her sole visit to them in California, when she lit up a cigarette and then allowed it to fall out of the ashtray and burn the table.

Frannie Miller was also an atheist for reasons that were never divulged. Late in life, suffering from dementia, she used to stand up from the lunch table in her retirement community, and start loudly reciting the Apostles’ Creed--but with the word “NOT” inserted at every juncture: “I do NOT believe in the God, the Father almighty...I do NOT believe in Jesus Christ....” “Sit down, Mrs. Miller!” the wait staff would beg. I wonder what she would think if she could see me now.

Frannie also had some pet phrases that she used, always with a twinkle in her eye. She would often say, throwing up her hands in resignation, that she was “poor but happy,” even though she led a comfortable life. “How are you, Mrs. Miller?” a cashier at the grocery store would ask. “Poor but happy,” she would say with a grin.

Little did Frannie realize that she was, kind of, quoting Jesus. “Happy are the poor” is one way to translate the first of Jesus’ Beatitudes that we heard in the Gospel reading today, from the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount.

Let's look for a moment at the word "blessed." The Greek word literally means "those of good fortune." But the New Testament meaning comes out of the Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek in the third century AD by a group of 70 Jewish scholars. The Hebrew word that these scholars translated *into* "blessed" actually means "happy," but not happy in the mundane sense. Rather, it refers to the nearly incomprehensible happiness of those who participate fully in the kingdom of God. It is the deep inner joy of those who, for so long, have awaited the promised salvation, and who now experience its fulfillment through the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is his first public act of ministry in Matthew's Gospel. As we will see over the next three weeks as we move through Matthew Chapter 5, Jesus is telling us how Christians are to live. The Beatitudes set the stage by laying out a description of those who are best positioned to fully receive the kingdom of God and that which comes with it—this deep happiness we are talking about, a spiritual contentment that nothing can shake, that peace which the world cannot give.

And who are these people who are so well positioned? The rich and powerful? Major religious leaders? Big philanthropists? Great generals? No: society's most vulnerable. As Paul reminds us in our second reading today, God has made foolish the wisdom of the world: As Christians, we proclaim not money or riches or power but Christ crucified, the man broken on the cross as the defining revelation both of God and of the human condition.

So here we have a catalogue of the most vulnerable. Let's look at verses 3-9. In Verse 3: Happy are the poor in spirit, meaning the oppressed, those who have been stripped of control over their own lives through the abuse of power by others. How can they be happy? Because all they have left is the kingdom of heaven. I don't think this was my grandmother's version of "poor

but happy." We were talking in Confirmation class last Sunday about the homeless and how the homeless people we've met are some of the most spiritual we've known. They talk freely about their complete dependence on God, because without Jesus, they would have nothing. This is true for all of us, but often we hide from it behind life's material distractions.

Verse 4: Happy are those who grieve. How can this be? Because they will be comforted. As all of you know who have grieved the loss of loved ones, as Judy Gundry's family knows in the wake of her death Friday, in the midst of our sorrow we become acutely aware of Jesus Christ, our compassionate shepherd, who gathers us into his arms when all else seems to have fallen away. We come to know him more deeply through our grief and loss. This knowledge brings deep happiness.

Verse 5: Happy are the meek, those who have been humbled. How can this be? Because they will inherit the earth. Those who don't oppress others, who don't exercise power ruthlessly, but who see all that of life and everything in it comes from God, they will benefit from the regeneration of life through good stewardship of all God's gifts. To them belongs the future of the earth.

Verse 6: Happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice (a more accurate word than righteousness). How can this be, since they must not yet possess justice, if they are seeking it? Because, as we heard in the reading from Micah, the Lord requires of his people that they do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with him. In doing justice, they will be filled—they will be satisfied, in that our God is a God of justice and God's judgment and justice always come in the right way at the right time.

Verse 7: Happy are the merciful, those who show mercy to others, for they will be shown mercy. And those who don't, won't. I like to think of the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant in

Matthew 18, whose debt was entirely forgiven by his king when he admitted couldn't pay it—but who, on his way out the door, happened to pass a fellow servant who owed him money and demanded that person pay him on the spot. When the king found out, well, the parable does not end well for that servant.

Verse 8: Happy are the pure in heart, those for whom Christ is at the center and whose lives are not derailed by worldly attachments, for they will see God—they are focused on God.

Verse 9: Happy are the peacemakers. Jesus' way is that of peace. We are even to love our enemies. In being peacemakers we show ourselves to be children of God.

Verse 10 is a restatement of verse 3, and the final two verses of our reading tell us that, in fact, persecution gives us an opportunity to exercise our faith by testifying to the truth of Christ. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven," Jesus concludes.

The Beatitudes invite us to open ourselves to God in all of our vulnerability in each of these ways. We are oppressed, held back, by health or economic or political circumstances; we live in grief for those we have lost; we have been humbled by a life that was perhaps not what we envisioned in our youth; we endured injustice, or were persecuted, accused of things we did not do by others who sought to undermine us. Yet, Jesus tells that the kingdom of heaven belongs to US, because in all of these ways we become closer to God. We don't have to pretend to be anything other than what we are. Deep happiness, we will then discover, comes from accepting life as it is, not as we wish it could be, and living out of the compassion and integrity of that wholeness.

Rejoice, and be glad. Yours is the kingdom of God. AMEN.