

## Blessed to be a blessing

Pinegrove United Church, Jan. 29, 2017.

Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

We all have our heroes, people we deeply respect and look up to, maybe they are even role models for us. When I was a little kid, my hero and role model was... well, Mary Poppins; I would even secretly ask God for Mary Poppins to float into *my* life and take *me* and my sibs for a tea party on the ceiling, or dancing over the rooftops.



A more recent hero of mine, shortly after we immigrated to Canada, is Pete Seeger. Pete Seeger was a folk singer who dedicated his life and his music to wherever people were struggling for their rights and their dignity. He died a few years ago, 94 year old, singing for a better world until the very end.

Many of his songs sing out the truth that love is stronger than hate, peace stronger than war and justice stronger than the forces of

oppression. Here are some snippets of some of his songs almost everyone knows... [*This Land Is Your Land*”, “*If I Had a Hammer*”, “*Where Have all the Flowers Gone?*”, “*Turn, Turn, Turn*”, “*We Shall Overcome*”.]

Pete Seeger lived an extraordinary life marked by hard work, skilled musicianship, modesty, kindness – and the courage to always act out of love rather than fear or distrust. Seeger’s inseparable banjo had these words written on it: “This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender”. It was what he believed in and modelled his entire life after: that ultimately the power of love and generosity will overcome the forces of hate and division.

Seeger’s take on life and what’s important in it was very, very different from what most people believe. So *of course* he was distrusted by the authorities who ridiculed him, persecuted him, beat him up, threw him in jail, blacklisted and boycotted him. But they were never able to silence him; his music never stopped galvanizing the people – and still does.

The reason I had to think of him today is that this is exactly what Christ calls us to do. And Christ did that right from the start of his ministry in that Bible passage we call the Beatitudes, or the Sermon on the Mount (or the Plain, in Luke’s gospel). In it, he lays his cards on the table and says, this is what my ministry is about. This is what life is about; this is what God has in mind for us.

Like Seeger’s songs, the Beatitudes challenge us to look at life and what it means to be successful in *God’s* way, turning conventional wisdom upside down. It’s a passage which, if you don’t listen carefully, seems to bless those things which most of us would call a curse – not a blessing. Or do they...?

Looking at the world through the lens of our faith, things are not as they seem. What the world tells us is important or valuable in life is often the exact opposite of what Jesus tells us is important or valuable. His teachings flip conventional wisdom on its head. And the Beatitudes are a powerful example of that.

Most of us have been taught that the Beatitudes are kind of like a list of conditions we should try to meet in order to be blessed, right? And that the people who suffer now will get their reward later in the afterlife. It's like Jesus is telling us to try real hard to be meek and poor and mourning and suffer so that we might be blessed in the eyes of God after we die.

And so we try (kind of), and quickly find out, "Man, this is hard! I mean, who can do really this? Maybe saints like Mother Teresa can pull this off, but not little ol' me!" It can be easy to look at saints like Mother Teresa and think, well, she was poor and meek and suffered, and she probably mourned a lot, too; and there's no doubt she is in heaven. So if I want to be blessed and go to heaven, too, I should try and be meek and poor and suffer just like her."

But there's a more interesting way to look at it. In her book "Accidental Saints" theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it this way: "I don't think that her virtue of poverty or meekness is why Jesus would call Mother Teresa blessed. What if the Beatitudes aren't about a list on conditions we have to meet in order to be blessed? What if they are not virtues we should aspire to...?"

Now don't get me wrong, I do think we could use a few more people to be like Mother Teresa, but Jesus doesn't ask us to become saints just by trying to live a meek life of poverty and suffering.

This is where we have to talk a bit about what "blessings" are. Basically, a blessing is something good you receive without having done anything to deserve it. And because we don't deserve any blessing, we can't claim it for ourselves, we have to share it with others, folks who also didn't do anything to deserve them (that's the hard part; receiving a blessing is easy).

In other words: being blessed *ourselves* implies that we are called to bless *others*. Blessings are never a one-way street, blessings go both ways, in fact they go all over the place! Being blessed means you now have the responsibility to bless others; you have to pay it forward, so to speak. The more you get, the more you give – and the more you give it away, the more it grows. Blessings never run out by giving them away – they run out when we keep them for ourselves, when we hoard them. It's just another example of how faith turns traditional wisdom on its head.

Getting back to Jesus blessing all these people who definitely did not feel very blessed with their lot in life: it wasn't *their* choice to be poor or meek, or to mourn or to suffer, like Mother Teresa chose to. So what if the Beatitudes is all about Jesus' extravagant blessing the "accidental Mother Teresa's", the "accidental saints" around him, especially all those who this world doesn't seem to have much time for: people in pain, people who work for peace instead of for profit, people who operate out of mercy instead of vengeance or greed.

What if Jesus was simply blessing the ones around him that day who didn't otherwise receive any blessing, folks who had come to believe that for them, blessings would never be in the cards. Jesus blessed them, because he realized at this starting point of his ministry that these people matter. Not so much the powerful, or the rich or well-off, not the highly educated, they have too much to lose. It's the poor, the people who have nothing left to lose – the meek the suffering, the mourning, the persecuted, the peacemakers. And so Jesus blesses them extravagantly so they may bless others – and us who have so much to lose, so we may discover the things that really matter in this life: love, community, peace, unconditional acceptance, justice. Everything else is just frills – not blessings, but frills.

The world tells us that the smart thing is to look out for ourselves first, that it's foolish to share what you've got our neighbour just because they are poor, or Aboriginal or Muslim or gay. But Jesus and the prophets would all agree that the foolish way is God's way. We are called to be community *together* and to seek the good of *all*, for it is only when all benefit that we can truly be blessed.

The kingdom of God is at hand, said Jesus, it's so close you can smell it. Or, as peacemaker Pete Seeger sang: "Deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome some day!" Amen.

### **Matthew 5:1–12 (the Beatitudes)**

<sup>1</sup> One day, as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, <sup>2</sup> and he began to teach them.

<sup>3</sup> "God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him,  
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

<sup>4</sup> God blesses those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> God blesses those who are humble,  
for they will inherit the whole earth.

<sup>6</sup> God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice,  
for they will be satisfied.

<sup>7</sup> God blesses those who are merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup> God blesses those whose hearts are pure,  
for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> God blesses those who work for peace,  
for they will be called the children of God.

<sup>10</sup> God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right,  
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

<sup>11</sup> "God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers.

<sup>12</sup> Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.