Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren  
Pastor Katie Shaw Thompson, February 2, 2020  
“Fresh Air: Winds of Blessing” – Matt. 5: 1-12

Have you ever noticed that when telling a story a lot depends on the perspective of the person doing the telling?

Are we hearing the story from the owl or the mouse? From Cinderella or the broom on the hearth?

Are we hearing the story told by Republicans or Democrats? Israelis or Palestinians?

Moreover, have you ever noticed that our own stories can change when we change our perspective?

Would a spring rain be a blessing or a curse? It may depend on whether you are trying to play baseball or to see your freshly planted garden watered.

Have you ever wondered how God might tell a certain story? How would the perspective of the holy, divine force of love and justice that moves the universe differ from our human perspective? I’m guessing quite a bit.

Maybe it’s that difference in perspective that can make these first few verses from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which we read today, so very confusing, compelling, challenging, and comforting all at the same time.

We know this significant teaching section of Matthew is about to begin when Jesus ascends the mountain with his disciples or “climbing companions” as the Message version calls them.

There he lays out eight blessings. Considered as a whole, we hear Jesus describing folks who humans might describe as down on their luck, disadvantaged, or even losers.

Jesus tells their story from a different perspective. Those of us who struggle or suffer, teaches Jesus, are blessed.
He’s not saying the things humans suffer are not really such a big deal. He’s not saying we need to keep up a good front and pretend everything’s okay either. Remember, this is a man who had to flee his home country from a murderous tyrant as a child. He’s a man whose cousin John was jailed and executed for telling too much of the truth. He’s also Immanuel God with us, who will see his share of pain in the flesh. I think it’s safe to say that when Jesus calls the struggles of life blessings, he’s not making a Pollyanna statement or inviting us to live our lives like a polished, cheerful Instagram account. No, what he’s saying is much more profound. What he’s doing is inviting us to change our perspective on the stories of our lives, in order to see a little bit more how God sees.

The NRSV renders Jesus’ teaching thus:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

It is unlikely that today’s Superbowl Ads will feature those who are poor in spirit, in mourning, meek, merciful, pure in heart, or peacemakers. These attributes are not likely to sell cars, soda, or potato chips.

Humans may not always be too excited to find themselves in any of those
conditions. And yet, Jesus says, when we do, we’re blessed.

This is a much different story from the one I have often been given about how you know someone is really a good person if they have a lot going for them.

This is a much different story than the ones we may be tempted to tell ourselves if we worry that we must have done something bad to deserve the bad that has come to us.

Nothing could be farther from the truth, Jesus proclaims. Rather, in the midst of all the suffering that life brings, God’s blessing is with us, seeking our healing and wholeness.

John James Murphy was a well-liked resident of a local care facility who, when he died, had no relative to claim him or organize a funeral. This happens from time to time and when it does places like Symonds-Madison Funeral Home see to it that folks are given a proper burial.

In this case, the funeral home reached out to the media to invite the whole community to join them in honoring this man who had been a Dominick’s grocery store manager, a welder, and a jet engine mechanic in the Air Force.

Four to five hundred people gathered at the funeral home in Elgin this week.

The presiding minister told those gathered, “Many of you have come for a funeral for an unclaimed veteran.”

He continued, “What we would like for you to think about is this man is no longer unclaimed--he is ours.”

I think this is how God’s blessing works. It doesn’t mean that no bad will come to us. It doesn’t mean that when good or bad comes it’s because we’ve necessarily done anything to deserve it.

Rather, it means God’s blessing goes with us no matter what life or death brings our way.
So, we can stop telling ourselves the story that God is punishing us or that anybody deserves any of the ill that comes their way.

Instead, we can start reminding ourselves that God’s blessing is not just for the ones who have it all, but it is with us, all of us, especially in the midst of suffering and struggle. That is the reason we can rejoice and be glad.

It’s not that what we’re going through isn’t terrible, it’s that no matter what we’re going through we never go through it alone.

We can rejoice and be glad because when God tells the story. It always ends with the healing and wholeness that comes in God’s mysterious way and time.

When God tells the story, it always comes ‘round again to the promise of a new way, a new hope, a new life rising up from whatever ending we think we’ve found.

When God tells the story we are indeed, blessed.

When God tells the story we find ourselves carried by the winds of that blessed kin-dom of God.

When God tells the story we find that we are no longer alone but part of the shared blessing of this life God has breathed into being.

Whatever stories you are part of in this season of your lives, I pray you will find the winds of blessing blowing in and changing your perspective like a welcome breath of fresh air.

May it be so. Amen.