

2 Corinthians 4: 7-17

Matthew 5: 1-16

Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

June 10, 2012

It is important to me to begin a sermon on the Beatitudes with words we just heard from the apostle Paul:

But we hold this message in jars of clay to show that the all surpassing power comes from God and not from us.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that he and they are clay pots which hold the message of Jesus Christ. There is meant to be a contrast between the pot and the treasure it holds. In other words we should not be embarrassed or guilty or ashamed that the message of good news which we are commissioned to carry to the world is not perfectly fulfilled in our lives. *Of course it isn't! How can it be?*

A Christian is not someone who perfectly lives the life and teachings of Jesus. A Christian is someone whose life points beyond itself to Jesus. We are the containers of good news. We are not good news. We are simply the chipped clay pots who have been blessed to hold a treasure. We are not the treasure. Jesus is the treasure. And this is especially true of us as a collective witness to the person of Jesus and his mission. Together we hold this treasure in the cracked clay pot that is the church, the community of faith.

How many times have you heard someone say, "I do not go to church because they're all a bunch of hypocrites." To which the rejoinder is, "How right you are! And we can always use another one!" Well, the truth is that Jesus did not come to make little duplicates of himself. He came to become known in and through flawed, insecure, judgmental, anxious, loving,

courageous, generous and overwhelmed people like you and me. The wonder and joy of the Gospel is not that we represent perfectly the presence of Jesus in the world. The wonder of the Gospel and the amazing joy comes from realizing that God so loved the world that he became completely known in a human being named Jesus of Nazareth, born of two ordinary parents. But the wonder and the joy of the Gospel does not end there. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit—the living presence of Jesus came to dwell in the chipped clay pots of the disciples and through them to all future generations. And now that same Spirit dwells in you and in me. We are now the clay jars that hold the treasure of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our job is to treasure the treasure—to realize what a precious gift we have; to be humbled and awed that, knowing who we are and just how confused, overwhelmed and fearful we can be, and how often we say and do things which do not point to Christ—that knowing all this, God STILL allows this treasure to shimmer and shine in the chipped and cracked vessels which are you and me and us together.

This morning I ask you to come to hear these profound and perplexing teachings of Jesus not as something we have to do in order to meet a standard for what it means to be a Christian. Instead I ask you to hear in these words evidence of the treasure which we have been given to hold. I ask you not to see Jesus' words as marching orders which must be rushed out and accomplished. Instead, I invite you to consider that what Jesus sets forth in the Beatitudes—indeed, in the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, is in fact what happens when the treasure transforms the identity of the pot. For when the treasure defines the pot, no more does the pot think, "O what a poor pot I am!" Instead the pot rejoices, "O, how great the treasure is that fills my life and the life of my community of faith!"

This morning I am not going to try to explain the meaning of each beatitude. Instead, I ask you notice how subtly Jesus chooses his words. There are nine beatitudes. Eight of them begin, “Blessed are...” Surprisingly, the relevant word to me is the word “are”. It is a statement of present condition. It is something we are at a given moment. It is not a perpetual state of affairs. We are not always going to be in mourning. We are not always going to be poor in spirit, or meek. Nor are we always going to hunger and thirst for righteousness, or be merciful, or be pure in heart. We will not always be persecuted or insulted because of Jesus. (Although, we might wonder if we never encounter resistance for our faith.)

Jesus simply says “But when you *do* mourn; when you *are* merciful, when you *are* experiencing poverty of spirit; when you *are* persecuted for righteousness sake—if the treasure is defining the identity and the life of the pot, *you are blessed. You will experience the very things the world calls suffering as signs of blessing.*

This of course raises the question of what Jesus means by the word *blessed*.

The Greek word translated “blessed” is *makarios* which in this instance means *supremely fortunate*. Now I don’t need to tell you that, from a worldly point of you this makes no sense. Jesus clearly has a warped view of good fortune! But consider the words from the point of view of the treasure. From Jesus’ point of view, when we begin to grasp the miraculous fact that we are vessels of a spiritual treasure of value beyond counting all worldly standards of happiness dissolve in importance. There is no amount of earthly security which compares with the knowledge that we are bearers of the peace that passes all understanding, the peace of Jesus which the world can never give because everything the world has to offer dies. What is the one thing that not even death can take away: the eternal life of our living savior.

Thus it is that Jesus tells his disciples that when they recognize the surpassing gift of the love of God, when grief, deprivation, persecution happen, far from feeling self pity and resentment they will feel supremely fortunate! Why? Because they will realize that there is no power on earth that can harm them. They are free in the truest sense of the word.

Now Jesus is not a fool; nor is Jesus naïve. He knows that on this side of life no one except the rare few achieve this state. The rest of us struggle along coping with life the best we can. Jesus does not give us commands we cannot obey and then condemn us. He knows that we are on a journey. That is why he is the treasure and we are the chipped and cracked clay pots. As individuals we are small finger bowls. As a community of faith we are one giant urn, riddled with cracks and dings. Anyone looking for perfect people or the perfect church had better keep looking. Indeed, as Billy Graham once warned the new converts who had come forward to give their lives to Christ, "If there was a perfect church, it would be *imperfect* as soon as you joined it. Sometimes it is our chips and cracks that let out the light of the treasure.

But there is more to say. How are we to live in the midst of grief, hardship and suffering which cannot seem to rise above. How are we to live when we are arrogant instead of meek, harsh instead of merciful, when we spread conflict instead of peace, when we run from conflict and fail to witness to Christ the treasure?

There is a clue in the language that Jesus spoke which was translated into Greek, the Aramaic language. In Aramaic the meaning of the word translated *makarios* or *blessed* means *walk forth*. In other words "do not be discouraged in times of sorrow, fear, confusion and inner conflict: walk forth! Keep putting one step in front of another. Trust in your savior to lead you through the valley of the shadow. Walk forth when you say and do things that violate your faith

and turn people away from Jesus. Repent and seek forgiveness. Walk forth O blessed ones who bear the treasure in such unlikely vessels for in time you will get glimpses of the treasure within. You will rejoice. And when we catch this glimpse we will be a sign post of God's Kingdom. Amen.