

“Blessed are the Losers”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 5:1-12
July 2, 2017 - Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

On a July morning of the first summer we lived in Alabama, Amber and I took a trip down to Destin, Florida for a relaxing beach weekend. We turned off the interstate and rode those country highways down toward the Gulf, and just when we finally spotted the blue water of Choctawhatchee Bay, Mitzie got confused. Mitzie, I should mention, is the name of our dashboard Global Positioning System. Mitzie was telling us that the turn for the causeway that stretches the bay was coming up in one thousand feet. But a new road had been completed within the last month, so there was a giant blinking road sign that said: “Turn here! Your GPS is wrong!”

We turned, and Mitzie’s circuits went haywire. Her screen showed our little car flying out over the water, a fifth of a mile from the road. Recalculating! Recalculating! Danger, Will Robinson! She calmed down when we reached the other side, but poor Mitzie was never the same.

This past week the internet celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the first book in the Harry Potter series. In the third book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry obtains the “Marauder’s Map” — a magical parchment map of nearly every room and corridor at his school and which indicates with a dot and a name the precise location of every person in the castle. Imagine knowing where your chatterbox co-worker was taking his coffee break. Imagine knowing whether your know-it-all neighbor was in the park.

A problem arises — and the plot turns (no spoilers!) — when Harry and friends discover a person moving around on the map whom they know...well, let’s just say it’s someone who really ought not to be wandering the castle. It doesn’t make any sense. It’s impossible. The map is faulty. Harry’s GPS is wrong.

Imagine Jesus, seeing the crowds and going up on the mountain and sitting down and giving this sermon. At this point in the Gospel of Matthew, we haven’t actually heard much from Jesus yet. The first two chapters are the birth story and the holy family fleeing to Egypt. In the third chapter Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist. Chapter four finds Jesus tempted in the wilderness, collecting fishermen as his disciples, and then starting up his preaching and teaching and healing. Word starts to spread, and huge crowds from all over start to follow him. But we, the readers, aren’t privy to his words until right here, at the beginning of chapter five.

He is up on the mountain, like Moses, bringing the authority of a proclamation of truth from on high. He sits, like a rabbi, with wisdom for teaching and the shedding of light on the ways of God. This is it, y’all. This is the moment. We’re finally going to hear what this guy has to say. He’s that brilliant professor you’ve been dying to take a class with for over a year. He’s the incredible singer-songwriter you saved up to buy tickets to see. He’s that poet or author you’ve come to hear, with a book clutched in your hands that aches to be signed. But he’s also the doctor you’ve traveled a long way to meet for a

consultation. He's the prophet you have an inkling might have some deeper connection to the fabric of existence.

There are two circles that sit on the hillside, waiting to hear his words. First there are the disciples, who come to him, and are probably sitting closest. Surely they've heard some of this before, but nothing that Matthew felt crucial enough to tell us about in detail. And then there's the much larger circle of listeners: the huge cascade of seekers and yearners and curious skeptics that flows down the hill below the disciples and Jesus.

And he begins to speak, and he doesn't start slowly. It is far easier to mishear the beatitudes than to hear them for what they are. Here's a clue: if we're not confused and we don't flinch a little and we're not just a wee bit offended, we're not hearing them properly. Blessed are the poor in spirit? The meek will inherit the earth? Blessed are the persecuted? He's promising the kingdom of heaven — as if it were his to promise! — to those who are clearly not very well blessed. How are those who mourn blessed? What is this guy talking about? I look around and I see a mess, not blessing. All I need to do is look down the hill — whether I'm a disciple near him, taking in the masses or simply someone who was able to climb up higher than one other person — and I can see the wretched and the cursed and the oppressed. Rome is oppressing us, and they're just the most recent overlords. Times are hard. The landscape is kind of bleak. I think this guy is reading the map upside-down.

Either that is true, or the map of divine blessings looks very different from the maps we use. To see the world from Christ's perspective is to see a landscape that itself is in motion, moving toward the kingdom of God. There are empty spaces, where there is longing and struggle and lament and prayer and hymns. There are roads that do not yet exist — or more precisely, roads that we cannot yet trust to be there. We fear we'll be left out on the water. But Jesus says, *Hey, I know it looks like the world is the opposite of what I just said. I get that. But I am not here to tell you what you know. I am here to clarify reality. I am here to proclaim the reign of God. I am here to get you oriented to a faithful life. That's why I started with this point: that your map is wrong.*

The two circles ought to hear this in different ways.

For the crowd, they hear the truth from on high: not the conditions for blessing, or sweet hopes for a better world, but a blessing for them from their God. The weary and the mournful and the persecuted and the meek and the poor in spirit are blessed. Full stop. It's not the tense that's wrong here. It's not ironic or anticipatory in the blessing. It's that our map of blessing is wonky. Our president did not invent the idea that those who suffer or struggle or weep or seek peace are losers. (Though he has certainly perfected it.) It seems to be in our nature to see those that succeed financially and socially as blessed: *Blessed are the rich, the compromising, the opportunistic, the brash, the ones who don't get captured, the ones bold enough to make war.*

And here comes Jesus, saying that the poor, the powerless, the ones unable to make things happen — as well as those who choose to stand in humility, choosing faithfulness over control — are God's priority. And to begin grasp that concept is in itself a blessing. It's is truth from the mountain. It is good news. It is gospel.

The disciples are to hear these words as well, from the rabbi sitting before them, giving them their marching orders, reorienting them to a new course. You, my inner circle, my insiders, hear this: they, the huddled masses, they are my insiders. They are God's inner circle. This blessing is for them. This blessing is to recalibrate you. You have known one way of being. It's time for some recalculating, recalculating...

Jesus's map of blessings, after two thousand years of church, continues to look weird to us. Have you ever looked at an old map? Maybe one from a just a few decades ago, that shows the U.S.S.R. and Germany divided into East and West. Of course, if you look at a map of Alabama from 1850, you'll see Tuscaloosa and Talladega, but you sure won't find Birmingham. If we refuse to act on climate change, today's maps will show land masses that will sink beneath the sea. Historical maps are fascinating and they can look strange. But we understand them — there's a story about how they change over time.

This map of blessings has a story too, of course, but it's wild and irrational and not scientific and it's still being written. We are always trying to square the faith of the followers of Christ with the map that humanity authors. We try to make it make sense — to synchronize the maps. But only one map changes when we do that, and it's our own. This is how we've ended up with preachers telling us that God wants us to be rich and powerful and that American Christians are lifted up in a special way, above the crowds pouring down the hill.

We can't make it make sense, these differing visions of the way the world works. We can't make it jibe. Instead, let's see where the different paths lead. When we believe that those born on third base (who sometimes are under the impression that they hit a triple) are blessed, and those whom Jesus describes as "blessed" are losers, decisions about how we live will follow from that.

Do you know what Caesar Augustus, John D. Rockefeller, and Genghis Khan all have in common? They can't hula hoop. And why can't they hula hoop? Because they're dead. Power and fortune are ephemeral. Barons and paupers all die.

But on another route, when life sends you through the tumble cycle, blessings and love find you. You mess up, and the result is an invitation to break bread, to come to the table of grace. Your heart breaks, and you find there is someone in another pew, prepared to hold it together for you as you grieve. You yearn for God's kingdom, but you can't figure out how to change any of this mess. And you find fellow believers doing just that.

The people of God move back and forth between the first circle of disciples and the teeming crowd. Some days we need the good news — that there is a blessing for sorrow and meekness and seeking peace. And some days we need the reorientation — the reminder that we follow a different map. It's a map that proclaims deep truth now as well as a prophetic future. It shows us where the blessed are, and that surprises us every time. And it shows us where God is, and that somehow surprises us too. And we see empty spaces longing to be filled, and we wonder where our little dot ought to be. Amen.