

Matthew 5: 9

First Presbyterian Church

Rev. Lynn Vahle

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Many years ago now Jerry and I greeted a visitor at church one morning. He returned for some event we were having that evening and the pastor asked if we would mind dropping him at his hotel downtown on our way home. When we got to the hotel he invited us to his room for conversation. We accepted and it was an interesting experience as he talked about his faith in ways we had never heard. When we left he gave us a book called *The World Upside Down*. It was a study of the Beatitudes and the idea of the book was that the world has one idea about how things should be but Jesus had another idea. An idea that turns the world upside down. And just to make sure you get the point every beatitude has two chapters, one printed right side up and one printed upside down.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus begins his ministry after the time of testing in the wilderness. He begins with the proclamation to repent (meaning turn around) for the kingdom of heaven has come near. He calls the first of his disciples and ministers in the area of Galilee. And then Matthew gives us the first of Jesus' five teaching discourses which make up the structure of Matthew's account of the life of Jesus. The first teaching is known to most of us by the title "The Sermon on the Mount". But most scholars agree that it is Matthew's way of putting the teachings of Jesus together in a way that could be remembered even memorized. And the first 11 verses of chapter five are the Beatitudes so named because each verse begins with the word "blessed".

To be blessed was to be favored by God, to be in alignment with God,

to enjoy the gifts of God. A blessing isn't something you earn - that would be a reward or wages. To be blessed is to be recognized by God as righteous. But if we look at the Beatitudes we soon begin to see that the favor of God doesn't always go where the world thinks it should go.

Jesus said "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The world says that blessed are those who are rich in spirit. Who have great enthusiasm. Who have an indomitable spirit. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn". The world says blessed are those who are happy. Who have perfect lives untouched by tragedy. Who never have to spend time weeping. Jesus said "Blessed are the meek". The world says blessed are the bold and the brave. Those who speak up and speak out. Those who refuse to be a doormat. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who seek righteousness". The world says, "Blessed are those who seek fame and fortune and success and power and wealth. And never get caught doing anything questionable. Jesus doesn't call us to a higher standard of living. Jesus calls us to a totally different standard of living. Being a Christian goes far beyond simply believing that someone named Jesus was born of a virgin and died for the sins of the world. Being a Christian means that we have to let the words of Jesus transform the way we look at life and the way we live life. We have to let his life become the model for life because he lived totally controlled by the love of God and that is what he called us to do as well.

This morning during the Sunday School hour and again on Friday evening we will begin a class on peacemaking. It is a class we will offer again early next year because we want everyone to take the class at some time. Why do we think the class is so important? Because every one of us lives in a world filled with conflict. We experience conflict in our personal lives, in our working lives, in our congregational life, in our community life

and in our national life. And sometimes we are even conflicted within ourselves. Conflict is one of those constants that we simply cannot avoid.

In the material that is used in the class conflict is defined just in case you can't spot it on your own. "Conflict results when my desires, expectations, fears, or wants collide with your desires, expectations, fears, or wants." To put it about as bluntly as possible conflict occurs when I don't get my way because, of course, I am right.

The world has a lot of advice about conflict. Blessed are those who stand up and fight for what they believe. Blessed are those who refuse to fight and simply walk away. Those are the two ways that we generally deal with conflict - fight or flight.

Many of us are by nature or by inclination conflict avoiders. We are the peacekeepers of the world. We try to smooth things over. Even if we disagree we never say so publicly. We change the subject. We smile a lot. We refuse to admit there is a problem. We avoid certain people and certain situations. And we feel that the responsibility for resolving a conflict belongs to someone else.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who go on the attack when there is a conflict. The idea is to prove in one way or another that the opponent is wrong and come out the winner. Of course, the most obvious method of attack is to resort to violence. We try to settle our disagreements with brutality. Parents attack children, spouses attack each other, business partners attack one another, and people of majority groups attack minorities. We live in a violent society. But there are other ways of going on the attack. We can settle a conflict by taking a neighbor to court. We can settle a conflict by presenting our side of the story in the court of public appeal. In other words gossip. We can say some pretty nasty things about the people

with whom we disagree or who are frustrating our efforts believing that some how that is going to work to resolve the conflict or at least make us feel better.

The world tends to honor the warrior. But Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are the fighters". And Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are the peace keepers". Jesus said, "Blessed are the peace makers". Blessed are those who do what it takes to create peace where there has been or is conflict.

When we look at the life of Jesus we might be surprised to find that he did not live at peace with everyone. He was in almost constant conflict with the Pharisees of his time. And at times he minces no words with them calling them whitewashed tombs. We know that there were at least a couple of instances when he was in conflict with his family. At the wedding of Cana he said to his mother, "woman what do I have to do with you". And another time his mother and his brothers came to take him home because they thought he was out of his mind. He dismissed them saying, "who are my mother and my brothers?" And in the 10th chapter of Matthew, in the second teaching discourse, he says "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword".

Jesus was no stranger to conflict. It was as much a part of his life as it is of ours. You cannot be human and avoid all conflict. How we handle conflict tells us a great deal about our priorities and our values. Jesus came not to avoid conflict. And he didn't come to bring the kind of peace that simply shuts its eyes to conflict and walks piously away. He came to make peace. He came to teach us how to be peace makers.

Making peace requires that we acknowledge that there is a conflict. And making peace requires more patience and courage than either fighting or fleeing. Making peace means working through the issues.

