

What Are You Here After?

Matthew 5:1-12

Rev. Dan Schumacher

It was several weeks ago now. I was out at Geneva Malbrough's house for a visit. For those of you who don't know, Geneva, at 97 years old, is one of our longest tenured members of FBC. (She'd also be mad at me if she knew I was talking about her and I didn't add that she wishes she could be here to worship with us every week.)

When I go see Geneva, there is always coffee made and always cookies ready. "Real cookies," she calls them, because unlike the cookies she eats the ones she gets for me have sugar in them. Even when we were shut down during COVID and I was doing porch visits with members, she set up a card table in her garage complete with a table cloth, fancy napkins, her nice coffee cups and with saucers – the kind you can't fit a finger through the handle. When I got there, she opened the garage door and we had coffee and cookies in the open air.

But, no matter what, all of our conversations – whether in the garage or at the kitchen table – begin with Geneva telling me some little joke. It's always something silly, usually a "St. Peter at the pearly gates" joke or "a priest, a rabbi, and a baptist" joke.

So imagine my surprise when I showed up for that visit a few weeks ago and there was no joke. She sat me down at the kitchen table. She poured me a cup of coffee. She sat down opposite me. And she said, "Pastor, do you ever think about the hereafter?"

At 97 years of age, I imagine there's hardly a day goes by that Geneva does not think about what's beyond this reality. I paused before answering and then I said, "Sometimes, I do. Geneva, do you think about it?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Just this morning, I walked into the bedroom, and when I got there, I asked myself, 'Now, what am I here after?'"

She got me. Set me up perfectly. Had me in full "pastor-mode" and then dropped the punchline. And I took it hook, line, and sinker. "*Now, what am I here after?*"

Here's the thing – the question Geneva asked herself is the one that I want to put to you this morning: What are you here after?

Why bother with church? With faith? With God? What are you *really* here after?

There was a time when Church was central to the life of most of our communities. Back then, Sunday School wasn't just Bible study, but actual education for the poor and disenfranchised. Sunday School actually taught "reading, writing, and arithmetic." But times have changed. Now the public school is the central organizing entity of most communities. Life is scheduled not around the church calendar but the school calendar.

So what are you here after?

Is it for the sense of community, or, as we say in church-speak, the “fellowship?” Maybe some of us are, but there are a hundred and one other ways to scratch that itch other than church. Just go on Facebook. They have groups for people who like knitting and ultimate frisbee groups and baking groups. They even have a group for people who like to take their cats on hikes. If you have an interest, there’s a group out there for you.

What are you here after?

Is it because you hope to better yourself and think church could part of that answer? Did you know that there are an estimated 15,000 new self-help books published each year in America? Surely one of them can help you on your quest to self-fulfillment.

What are you here after?

Is it because you hope that by showing up to church God will shower favor upon you? Grant you that promotion? Help you win the lottery? O Lord, won’t you buy me that Mercedes Benz? #*Blessed*? I hate to burst your bubble, but there was a time when someone told Jesus they would follow him wherever he went, and do you know what Jesus said in reply? He said, “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests; but the son of man has no place to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20). Following Jesus isn’t about getting rich.

What are you here after?

I have to think that as Jesus looked out over that crowd of people from the top of that mountain he was asking himself the same question: what are they really here for?

You have to remember that as Matthew tells the story, Jesus’ public ministry began with a bang. He was going around all over the region of Galilee teaching and preaching the good news *and* healing people of every kind of sickness — people “afflicted with disease and pain, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics...” Those miraculous healings not only drew great crowds to him, but they started *following* him around (Matt.4:24-25).

He’s been in public ministry for about 12 verses and he’s already pulling crowds. His popularity soared. The crowds grew and grew and grew everywhere he went — all hoping for a little bit of that magic, that healing touch, just a little taste of that power. You can imagine them murmuring to one another, “If he can do this, what can’t he do?”

I have to believe that he looked out at those crowds, he asked himself, “What are they *really* here after? Is this just about what they can gain for themselves, or are they really ready to enter into my kingdom?” So he climbed the mountain. He sat down, which is the way you knew a rabbi was about to get serious — they sat down. He opened his mouth and... he *blessed* them.

There was only one problem. They weren't the kind of blessings you'd expect... or even *want*.

Blessed are the *poor* in spirit? Blessed are those who *mourn*? Blessed are the *meek*? Blessed are those who are *persecuted*? Who wants that kind of blessing? No one. That's who.

There's a story from Genesis 48 where Joseph — the famous Joseph, the one with the amazing technicolor dreamcoat, whose brothers sold him into slavery and ended up becoming second in command of all of Egypt, that Joseph — brings his two Egyptian-born sons to their grandfather, Jacob, so that he can bless them.

By this point, Jacob is old, his eyes failing, his strength all but gone. But Joseph wants his father to bless his children. So Joseph positions his sons in front of their grandfather, with Ephraim at Jacob's left hand and Manasseh at his right. But when Jacob reached out to give the boys his blessing he crossed his hands, putting his right hand on the younger son and his left hand on the older.

Joseph saw what was happening and he said, "No, dad! You're getting it all wrong! This one is the older one. Put your right hand on his head."

But what Jacob said in reply was, "Leave it alone, son! I know what I am doing." And he gave the greater blessing to the lesser son (Genesis 48:13-16).

That's almost what Jesus does here.

He gives a blessing to be sure, but he crosses his arms and he blesses those those who do not look *#blessed*.

Did you know that Jesus' beatitudes are not the only beatitudes in scripture? Most of the others are found in Psalms or Proverbs — the wisdom literature. The word, beatitude, means something like "How happy, how fortunate, how blessed are those who find themselves in certain circumstances." In other places in scripture, they go something like:

- "Happy are those who find wisdom and those who get understanding" (Proverbs 3:13).
- "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the way of the Lord" (Psalm 119:1 .
- Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart" (Psalm 119:2.

Those beatitudes are examples of what would have been understood as *conventional* wisdom. "If your way is blameless, you'll be happy. If you find wisdom, you'll be blessed. If you keep the Lord's decrees, it will go well with you." They come from a time when people believed that if you did all the right things, and said all the right

words you would be blessed — with health, wealth, and all that entails. But if you weren't blessed, it was because you had messed up in some way — had fallen short, had missed the mark — so God had not blessed you.

But then Jesus comes around and rather than putting his right hand on the ones who were healthy and wealthy and had “the good life,” he crosses his arms and puts his right hand on the heads of the broken-spirited, the broken-hearted, the persecuted, the ones who are starved for rightness in this world — and he blesses *them*.

Conventional wisdom tells us that what Jesus says can't be true. How can anyone whose persecuted, starved of justice, or broken-hearted be blessed, be fortunate, be *happy*?

That's the twist though, isn't it? When have you bought what some commercial sold you and had it make you really and truly happy?

I'm not saying you didn't enjoy that vacation, that pizza, that new smartphone. But did it fill you? Sustain you? Give your life deeper purpose and meaning?

The beatitudes are a blessing and promise, but they are more than that, too. They're an invitation to enter into the God's kingdom. And, as is always the case with Jesus, you don't make it in on what you can achieve. You get in by being at the end of your rope.

Listen to the way Eugene Peterson translated the beatitudes:

- “You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.
- “You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.
- “You're blessed when you're content with just who you are — no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.
- “You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.
- “You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.
- “You're blessed when you get your inside world — your mind and heart — put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.
- “You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.
- “You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom (*The Message*).

Why are you here? What are you here after?

I hope that it's because you have learned the hard way that what others say will make you happy is fool's gold, and you're just too tired to keep panning for what doesn't sustain you, doesn't give you purpose or meaning, hasn't made your life any deeper. And what you do for your life is something more.

The late-great, Disciples of Christ preacher, Fred Craddock, used to tell this story:

"I've never been to the greyhound races, but I've seen them on TV. They have these beautiful, big old dogs – I say beautiful, they're really ugly – big old dogs, and they run that mechanical rabbit around the ring, and these dogs just run, exhausting themselves chasing it.

I was in a home not long ago where they'd adopted a dog that had been a racer. It was a big old greyhound, lying there in the den. One of the kids in the family, just a toddler, was pulling on its tail, and a little older kid had his head over on that old dog's stomach, used it for a pillow. That dog just seemed so happy, and I said to the dog, 'Uh, are you still racing any?'

'No, no, no, I don't race anymore.'

I said, 'Do you miss the glitter and the excitement of the track?'

He said, 'No, no.'

I said, 'Well what's the matter? You got too old?'

'No, no, I still had some race in me.'

'Well, did you not win?'

He said, 'I won over a million dollars for my owner.'

'Then what was it, bad treatment?'

'Oh, no, they treated us like royalty when we were racing.'

I said, 'Then what? Did you get crippled?'

'No, no, no.'

I said, 'Then what?'

And he said, 'I quit.'

'You quit?'

'Yeah, that's what I said. I quit.'

I said, 'Why did you quit?'

And he said, 'I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit. And I quit.' He looked at me and said, 'All that running, running, running, running, and what I was chasing was not even real' (*Craddock Stories*, 106-107).

What are you really here after?

Are you tired of running, running, running after something that's not even real – not sustaining you, not helping you mature, not giving you a deeper sense of purpose?

Maybe what you need is to be blessed – not *#blessed* as our world understands it, but *really* blessed. The kind of blessing when Jesus crosses his arms and blesses you not where you're already a success, but where you are broken so that you might find wholeness.

I hope *that* is what you're here after.

Amen.