Opening prayer: Create in me a clean heart and guide my words, so my meditations may be pleasing to You, O Lord. Amen.

Today we read a portion of the Gospel better known as The Beatitudes. These words were spoken by Jesus to His disciples on a mountain near the Sea of Galilee as crowds were forming. When I read scripture, especially when the passage covers words spoken by Jesus, I like to place myself at the scene. Am I a member of the crowd, or one of the disciples?

I used to think the Beatitudes were rules of conduct that would enable me to obtain divine blessings. I also thought the Beatitudes were guidelines for the appropriate way to live with others. After examining this passage, I have a different interpretation of its core meaning. These words are about recognizing and using the "*Original Blessing*" or "virtue" that God has bestowed IN us.

The word "blessed" is repeated over and over; it is so important that Jesus uses it 9 times in the passage. What does that word mean? It comes from the Latin word *Beatus* which means profound Holy Joy, or **deep Joy of the Soul** – it describes a feeling of spiritual well-being -- a deep joy that fills the heart. It is found **deep down within us;** it is so vast and pervasive it can shine even in the bleakest circumstances. From

where does this blessing come? What kind of blessing is being discussed here?

I used to think blessings were rewards given in return for certain moral behaviors or religious practices. I had a transactional relationship with God: in exchange for my faith and worship, God would reward me with visible blessings. This transactional thinking permeated every aspect of my life – I came to situations to see what I could get instead of what I could give. It never occurred to me to **look within** my own heart to find True Blessing. Through the Beatitudes, Jesus offers us an idea on how to **find God living within us**. By connecting to God within us, we build intimacy with God. I now see blessings are not external rewards.

Jesus is describing the heart and mind of God to His disciples in the Beatitudes. Those Original Blessings are internal qualities or virtues that God pours into our hearts at birth. To illustrate this idea, let's look at the virtue of love. God poured Love into my heart. It was not given to me by my parents. I didn't go out and buy it. When my daughters were born, I experienced love at first sight; that love was freely given, they did not do anything to earn my love. Furthermore, I did not teach my daughters to love me; they give their love to me freely. Love is just one example of the many virtues God pours into our heart to be shared with others.

God's Original Blessing is bestowed IN us because we are OF GOD. We are not God, but we are OF GOD. The Bible is very clear about this not only is it discussed in today's Epistle in the first letter of John but it is also found in Genesis, right there in the front of the Book it says, "God created us in His Image." If God created us, then every single one of us is OF GOD. By making us in His Image, God gives us His virtues. As we become more aware of our virtuous connection with God over the course of a lifetime, our blessings grow. We become more likely to **follow** Jesus; not to just worship Jesus, but to **follow** Jesus. When we use our God given virtues, we grow in the *likeness of* God. And as we grow in that *likeness*, we become able to respond to ALL of life with gratitude, joy, service, and compassion. We become living examples of our Lord.

The definition of happiness Jesus describes here is completely different from the idea of happiness prevalent in today's society. Jesus carries a radical counter-culture message to us in the Beatitudes– He turns things upside down. He tells us not to seek Joy through power, prestige, or prosperity, but to redefine our Joy by connecting to our virtues of humility, forgiveness, and compassion. He encourages us to focus on our <u>inner</u> qualities rather than our external status or image – to find the Purity in our heart.

To illustrate this inner focus, let's look closer at the 7th Beatitude:

"Blessed are the peacemakers." What is a peacemaker? What kind of peace is Jesus discussing here? A peacemaker is someone who carries God's Peace in their heart and has the ability to share it with others. In order to share it, a peacemaker must first be aware of the Peace OF God in their heart. Is it enough to simply recognize the virtue in your heart?

As we learned last week, Jesus calls us to grow our virtue by taking action. He says to love God with all your heart AND your neighbor as yourself. But Jesus gives us detailed examples, in verse 44 of this chapter, Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." It is not easy to be a peacemaker, especially when we are hurt or angry. How does loving someone who has wronged us make us peacemakers? Is it possible to be a peacemaker if we hold onto anger, resentment, and contemplate retaliation? Jesus tells us not to be complacent. He tells us to take action based on virtue in order to see Christ looking back at you. He commands us to open ourselves up to vulnerability, to take the risk of loving others unconditionally – let God do the judging, it is our job to do the loving right here, right now. He tells us to embrace others with faith, courage, and love OF God. He tells us to USE our virtue.

Jesus also invites us to flip the examination of our conscience. Instead of asking, "What did I do wrong today?" - a question that I asked myself daily for decades particularly when things were not going my way - Jesus asks us to consider "How well did I do right in living out the call of God today?" Instead of "Did I start an argument? They started it." We might ask ourselves, "Did I bring Peace today?" Instead of "Did I judge an unkind person in silent scorn?" ask, "Did I pray for someone who was unkind to me?" Jesus invites us to ask the essential question: "**Did I display the Christ in me today**?" Jesus tells us to turn to the Blessing in our heart and take the action of a peacemaker. He tells us to connect to the presence of God IN you and sense the presence OF God around you. When we take action, we see God is present, even in those unkind, unfaithful people who have opinions that differ from our opinions.

God is concerned with ALL of us. In verse 16 of this chapter, He says, "Let your light shine before others." He calls us to take our internal Joy and spill it externally in the world. Acting out the Beatitudes with our neighbors is a reciprocal response to God's original love for us. If we do not take action, our Blessings remain blocked and trapped within us. Our Virtue cannot grow and flourish to usher in the Kingdom. Our Blessings and Actions are intertwined. They cannot be separated.

Through virtuous action, we **follow** Jesus, as **we write our own page** in the growing story of the Kingdom.

Before concluding, I would like to share a quote from the Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston that provided inspiration for this sermon and gave me insights into the Beatitudes:

> *Within each of us is a holy space where the Spirit meets and blesses us. Our challenge, is to accept and own that gift of blessing, that intimacy with the divine. The more we believe in ourselves as agents of love, the brighter our light will be. We can encounter this holy blessing, this generous gift of love from God accidentally, and move on to our next life experience. OR, we can make the choice to focus our attention on that still holy place inside us, to breathe in that love and that blessing that is ours alone. Allowing that love to 'fuel us for the light that we will generate' in this challenged world.*

May we go forth and live out the Beatitudes.
In Jesus name,
Amen