

# Haydenville Congregational Church

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Matthew 5:1-12

## “The New Covenant”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

In the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Scriptures, God accompanies Moses and the Hebrew people as they escape from slavery in Egypt, cross the Red Sea and travel through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. While in the wilderness on this epic journey, God establishes a covenant with the Hebrew people.

The covenant, described in the Book of Exodus and retold in the Book of Deuteronomy, is the special relationship God initiated and created with the people of Israel. God promised to love and care for the Hebrew people and in return they would promise their full allegiance and devotion to God. “I will be your God, and you will be my people,” God says as they create this solemn and formal agreement.

The covenant between God and the Hebrew people is mediated by Moses who serves as the guide and leader during the Exodus and as the one chosen to speak directly to God on behalf of the Hebrew people. As the spokesperson for the Hebrew people and the one with whom God communicates, Moses receives the Ten Commandments—the laws given to Israel—at Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments are a focus of the covenant God makes with the people of Israel but many chapters in the Book of Exodus elaborate on the principles of the Commandments and how they should be applied. In the Book of Deuteronomy, the Ten Commandments are repeated and explained AND this time they are accompanied by a long list of blessings and of curses that would befall the Hebrew people if they were obedient or disobedient.

Today’s Scripture reading is the well known well loved Sermon on the Mount which includes the Beatitudes, as they are called. So why review the flight from Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, wandering in the wilderness, and the covenant God made with the Hebrew people when our passage for today is from the **New Testament** and is about **Jesus** and his famous Sermon on the Mount?

I think we need to remember Moses, the escape from Egypt and the covenant God made with the Hebrew people when reflecting on the Beatitudes because there are significant parallels between Moses and Jesus, AND because the Beatitudes are in some ways the New Covenant that God makes with all of God's people.

Remember Jesus' birth story as told in the Book of Matthew includes the holy family escaping TO Egypt after Jesus is born. In Matthew, Joseph has a dream in which an angel tells him, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee TO Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Notice this interesting parallel: Moses and his people escape OUT of Egypt, Joseph takes Mary and newborn Jesus and escapes TO Egypt.

Water is also significant in the beginning of Jesus' ministry, just as water is central to the story of Moses leading his people across the Red Sea. At the start of Jesus' ministry, he wades into the Jordan River and kneels before John to be baptized.

And following his baptism, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he fasts for forty days and nights. Moses leads his people through the wilderness searching for the Promised Land.

Moses received the Ten Commandments as a sign of the covenant made between God and the Hebrew people. AND in some ways it can be said that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers the Beatitudes as a way of making a NEW covenant between God and God's people. But this time, the covenant extends God's promises to all of God's people—**this time the blessings are for Jews and Gentiles alike**. The Beatitudes are for everyone.

The Beatitudes, so named because the Latin word *beatus* means "blessed," can be considered a new covenant made with God's people, as understood and mediated this time through Jesus. In many ways, God is recreating the world, leading God's people into a whole new world, a new reality that blesses the most unlikely people and reverses the social norms and expectations of the time.

In a world that valued and rewarded power, military might, war, wealth, domination, conflict, hedonism, and indulgence, Jesus leads a crowd up a mountain and says the poor, mourners, the persecuted and peacemakers are especially blessed. This is staggering. It would have made no sense to the listeners. Is he crazy? The riffraff at the very bottom of the social ladder, those who are the lowest in the hierarchy of authority, influence and clout, those nobodies are especially blessed?

YES Jesus says, those nobodies. Those misfits and outcasts, those nonentities, they are especially blessed. Their lives now, in the present, hold the blessing and transforming power of God, as they live and struggle for justice, peace and wholeness in the world.

The Beatitudes stand as a **new covenant** in which God is not saying my blessings are reserved simply for the Hebrew people. Through Jesus, God is saying my blessings and my love are poured out upon the meek and the weary, the tearful and the merciful, the pure and the peacemakers. If that describes you, if that is how you feel, if that is what you do, then **YOU ARE MY PEOPLE** and you are especially blessed.

Because the Beatitudes are so well known and so well loved, I fear we sometimes fail to really hear them because we can recite and dismiss them as familiar.

**Today I want us to hear the Beatitudes anew.** They have been re-interpreted by scholars and theologians around the world. And I am going to offer you some new interpretations of the Beatitudes so that you hear the meaning behind the ancient and powerful words with new freshness. I want you to hear the new covenant that God is making with ALL God's people captured in these words. **Listen now to several re-interpretations of the Beatitudes, and may you hear the famous Sermon on the Mount again, for the first time.**

The great biblical scholar N.T. Wright translates the Beatitudes in this way:

*Wonderful news for the poor in spirit! The kingdom of heaven is yours.*

*Wonderful news for the mourners. You are going to be comforted.*

*Wonderful news for the meek! You are going to inherit the earth!*

*Wonderful news for people who hunger and thirst for God's justice! You are going to be satisfied.*

*Wonderful news for the merciful! You will receive mercy yourselves.*

*Wonderful news for the pure in heart! You will see God.*

*Wonderful news for the peacemakers. You will be called God's children.*

*Wonderful news for people who are persecuted because of God's way! The kingdom of heaven belongs to you.*

*Wonderful news for you, when people slander you and persecute you, and say all kinds of wicked things about you falsely because of me! Celebrate and rejoice: there's great reward for you in heaven. That's how they persecuted the prophets who went before you.*

Breathe that in for a moment.

And now listen to another translation, another re-interpretation of the Beatitudes, this next one by Chilean theologian P. Jacob.

*Blessed are the poor...  
not the penniless  
but those whose hearts are free.*

*Blessed are those who mourn...  
not those who whimper  
but those who raise their voices.*

*Blessed are the meek...  
not the soft  
but those who are patient and tolerant.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice...  
not those who whine  
but those who struggle.*

*Blessed are the merciful...  
not those who forget  
but those who forgive.*

*Blessed are the pure in heart...  
not those who act like angels  
but those whose life is transparent.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers...  
not those who shun conflict  
but those who face it squarely.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for justice...  
not because they suffer  
but because they love.*

Now another version...this one from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* by Eugene Peterson. Listen to what he has done with the Beatitudes:

<sup>3</sup>*"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.*

<sup>4</sup>*"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.*

<sup>5</sup>*"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.*

<sup>6</sup>*"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.*

<sup>7</sup>*"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.*

<sup>8</sup>*"You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.*

<sup>9</sup>*"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.*

<sup>10</sup>*"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.*

<sup>11-12</sup>*"Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.*

And now for the final interpretation of the Beatitudes, I offer you what I have written. And I need you to help me. You will find a copy of the Beatitudes, from

Book of Matthew, in your Bulletins. You will read one line and then stop, and I will read the version I have rewritten, my own interpretation of the Beatitudes.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

*You are safe and loved, you who are downtrodden, empty and distressed, for God will fill you with light and you will know God intimately.*

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

*You are held in holiness, you who grieve without ceasing for a wounded world that has lost its way, for God intends to use you to make the world right.*

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

*You are safe and loved, you who are humble and do not demand attention, God knows that your time and your turn are coming soon, and you, with your quiet power, will be in charge of all good things.*

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

*You are held in holiness, you who endlessly pursue fairness, justice, virtue and love, for your good works will fill your body with contentment and peace.*

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

*You are safe and loved, you who are unfailingly compassionate and forgiving, for compassion and forgiveness will visit you daily and perch on the frame of your door.*

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

*You are held in holiness, you who strive tirelessly to be wholesome and unsullied, for in your pursuit you will be kissed by God.*

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

*You are safe and loved, you who follow the ways of nonviolence and dare to struggle for peace, for you will be the first rays of sunlight that appear on the horizon at dawn.*

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

*You are held in holiness, you who are strong enough to endure being hurt badly for what is deeply good, for God's grace will fill you so completely that you will rise like mist over a still pond.*

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

*You are safe and loved, you who speak tenderly of me and are punished for it. Know that I am with you when they insult you, as I have been very near when they mistreated my beloved followers who have marched on before you.*

Amen.

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