

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “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. *

Good Trouble - November 1, 2020

Matthew 5:1-12

Life is filled with “what ifs?” The longer we live, the more decisions we have to make and the more decisions that we make, the more time we have to question ourselves about them. We are very much a product of our decisions, from whom we choose to marry to what our occupation is to where we choose to reside. And each of those decisions in turn affects so many other aspects of our lives.

You’ve heard, perhaps, of the “Butterfly Effect?” That’s the idea that even a minuscule change in events can lead to momentous outcomes. The Butterfly Effect says that when a butterfly flaps its wings, it moves the air in a certain direction. Under the right circumstances, that incredibly small movement of air could be just the extra tipping point needed to blow over a rock, which in turn could shatter a house, which could cause a family to move, which could place them in a new job or new schools, which could change their lives for the worse or better. And so on and so on.

Everyday we make decisions. The interesting thing about our decisions is that selections that seem insignificant to us might actually make a huge difference, not to us, but to somebody else. Consider the simple act of smiling at a colleague at work. Well, that simple smile could increase their confidence and with that increased confidence, it could be enough to enable them to take a risk that could change their lives forever. We just don’t know because everything we say and do is interrelated and in almost all cases, we will never fully understand or appreciate the impact of our words and actions on the world around us.

I raise the issue of decisions and Butterfly Effects because we all know that on Tuesday we have our final opportunity to vote for our leaders. Perhaps some or most of you have already voted, but if you haven’t I urge you to first pray to God for guidance then and only then, step into the voting booth to cast your ballot. Elections are amazing things in their power to affect people’s lives. Every vote does make a difference and it should be very obvious in 2020 how the power of previous elections has affected our state, nation, and world for better and worse.

This morning’s scripture concerns something that I hope we are all familiar with: the Beatitudes presented by Jesus. That word, Beatitude, is usually translated as “blessing.” Jesus begins most of them with the words, “Blessed are you ...” In other words, when we follow Jesus’s teaching and attempt to live the Beatitudes in our own lives, we will be receiving blessings from God: not necessarily money, property, or power — in fact quite the opposite. The blessings we will receive are spiritual and at first glance, hard to define. Yet every one of the beatitudes is a Butterfly Effect.

Consider what Jesus is saying. We are blessed when we are poor in spirit, dejected, sad, lacking direction and guidance. What is special about that? Well it often is only at such times that we are

most open to God and God's leading, meaning that from our sorrow can come new ideas and directions we perhaps never considered before.

Likewise the decisions we make when we are in mourning. I'm talking about loss of all kinds here, not just a loved one, but perhaps a job, or home, or lifestyle. It is those times when we mourn that we often think about our lives and their directions — again making us open to God's plan and purpose changing our lives.

Those who seek righteousness and grant mercy are particularly fruitful sources of the Butterfly Effect. How do we seek righteousness? How do we grant mercy? Well mostly these are things we do on a very small scale. Just standing up for one person, defending them, helping them is an act of righteousness. Forgiving, helping, healing, walking with another is an incredible act of mercy. It's like the old story of the boy walking along a beach, flinging a few of the multitude of starfish which had been washed up back into the ocean. When told by his father that tossing a handful of starfish back into the ocean couldn't make any difference, the boy replied, "It does to the starfish." Little acts, little actions of righteousness and mercy. You might think you're doing nothing at all, but it is not our place to know whether we are making a difference or how big a difference we might be making. It is merely our place to just do. And when we do, we bless others whether it is one, or thousands.

Aren't those who are pure in heart, aren't those who are peacemakers, aren't they the ones who really make human society possible? Consider all the interactions we have with each other, every day. Consider the interactions between businesses, between governments, between organizational leaders big and small. Consider how often things can go wrong and often do. There is so much potential all the time for mistakes and anger and irritation and misunderstanding and conflict.

Isn't it those very special people, the pure in heart and the peacemakers, who make it their business by their words and by their examples to reduce the amount of friction and tension in this world? Sometimes they lead by words. Mostly they lead by example. All the time, the pure in heart and the peacemakers serve to model the behaviors and attitudes God expects from us all — though few of us can be pure or peaceful all the time. Aren't such people blessed? Of course they are, because they are a blessing to society. We could not function without them smoothing our relationships, at whatever level.

And then we come to the stranger blessings. Jesus tells us we are blessed when we are persecuted for sharing the good news and being a blessing to others and speaking the truth and daring to change the world. All these things Jesus urges us to do are good — yet all these things Jesus urges us to do can get us into trouble. Following the Beatitudes, in short, is the very definition of "good trouble."

In 2020, being a follower of Jesus Christ is quite unfashionable. We know it's true. Churches are closing all the time, closings accelerated by the Covid Crisis. Hardly a week goes by without another

scandal in the Church, whether financial abuse or sexual abuse. The media tends to assume that all Christians embrace the politics of the far right, with all that entails. With that in mind, why would anyone want to follow Jesus Christ or become part of any church?

Let us look closely at the core of Jesus' teaching as summarized in the Beatitudes. Should we not conclude that Jesus, far from being a tool of the status quo and therefore a supporter of some very disturbing statements from some of our current leaders, is in fact its most radical opponent?

These Beatitudes, friends, are far more than just suggestions on what we should do in life, they together present a mental and spiritual attitude on how we should think. There is nothing in the Beatitudes that supports our power-centered, possession-driven, dog-eat-dog society that is most of us consider to be normal or even desirable. In Jesus' world the strong are overcome by the weak. Love destroys hate. Peace defeats war. The poor are valuable and it is the rich who are suspect. Do these ideas look like today's society? I mean does any political party embrace these concepts?

We all know, the answer is a resounding, "no!" One political party may be a bit closer than the other to Jesus' vision for the world, but neither come very near at all.

That is why Jesus was killed. His ideas were and still are too radical for society. Jesus spent his ministry causing nothing but "good trouble" everywhere he went because he wanted human beings to live by the law of love, and nothing else. Throughout his life, he always made someone from the establishment angry because they realized Jesus' ideas were a threat to the comfy, cozy world they had made for themselves.

Jesus calls us to include everyone, to accept everyone as they are, to confess that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness and God's love — who can deal with that? But isn't that what we are all about when we call ourselves Christians? When we call Jesus our Lord and Savior, we are saying that we agree with Jesus' vision for the world and we want to be part of it. We want to live according to the Beatitudes. We want to turn the world upside down. We want to see all the hypocrisy vanish from our society so we can truly let love be our sole guide.

However, as Jesus makes it clear, following him is not a private act, it is a very public proclamation. He says, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." Well, that makes it pretty clear, doesn't it? We can only be reviled, we can only be persecuted, we can only be cursed by the world when we get out into the world and speak and act just like Jesus. The Holy Spirit living inside us cannot be kept inside, we have to let it out! We have to get involved! We have to make a difference!

I think many of you recognize the title of this sermon, "Good Trouble" as a slogan of the late Congressman and Civil Rights activist, John Lewis. I'm not sure how many of you know that

Congressman Lewis was also a seminary-trained ordained minister. Lewis knew his Bible and Lewis knew Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

We know his story, I hope. Born the son of sharecroppers, he proved his intelligence very early, earning a college scholarship. As a young man still in college, Lewis was active in organizing lunch-counter sit-ins throughout the South aimed at desegregating them. He then volunteered for the privilege of leading marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama as part of a demonstration for voting rights for African-Americans. For his troubles, Lewis was brutally beaten and his skull fractured. He thought he was going to die.

But friends, what we need to remember is that Lewis's foundation and inspiration for what he risked his life for comes from the Bible. From the first chapter of Genesis, God declares all human beings are equal. Are you interested in environmental justice? God declares in Genesis that human beings are to care for the earth, not destroy it. Do you believe health care is a right and not a privilege? Do you believe poor people, widows, and orphans should be treated with respect and dignity? That too, is all in the Bible. And they are all contained in the Beatitudes.

When John Lewis made Good Trouble, he was blessed by Jesus because his words and actions lead him to be persecuted for righteousness sake. When we stand up for justice, the environment, health care, human rights and find ourselves opposed, we are blessed because we are just doing what Jesus asked us to do. In short, it is not just John Lewis's mandate to cause Good Trouble in the world, if we say we follow Jesus, all of us are called to cause Good Trouble in the world.

But wait Mr. Preacher! That's not what I signed up for! I don't want to cause any trouble at all. I just want to live my life and not be bothered by all this justice and dignity stuff.

Hey, I'm sure John Lewis did not want to get his skull fractured. Nelson Mandela did not want to go to jail. Jesus certainly did not want to suffer and die. But they all caused Good Trouble and when you cause Good Trouble, there will be consequences. I have to tell you friends, that you, right now, are causing Good Trouble just by showing up in worship today! The church nowadays is becoming more and more an outside, rejected institution. The life of Jesus Christ is increasingly ignored as a guide for how we should live. Christ is simply not the light for most.

Your presence here is a witness for Christ. Your sharing in the Lord's Supper today is a witness for Christ. If what you hear today makes even the slightest change in your actions and attitudes, then in your own way you are causing Good Trouble because Jesus is working in your life.

Starting this week, I would like to add a short response to the benediction. After my final Amen, I would like us to say together, "Lord, may you this week open up doors for us to share your Word." Let's all go out and start making some Good Trouble in Jesus' name.