



A Servant Heart
January 30, 2022
Michelle Mehan, ELCA Deacon

Grace and peace to you. May the words of my mouth and mediation of my heart be acceptable to you O Lord my strength and my redeemer.

What a joy to be here today. What a privilege to celebrate with our Thankoffering and to bless these gifts.

So often when I prepare to share a message I read the scriptures multiple times. I seek words that speak to me, words that comfort, encourage and challenge me. I ask, what are these words saying. These words written so long ago, what do they mean today.

Anyone who knows me well also knows that I get so excited and passionate about things that I can have a hard time focusing on just one thing, I want to share it all. These readings are all so rich and full of words relevant to our lives and the ministry of this church. There are themes that carryover in each passage. Words and themes that repeat are important signals to pay attention to.

It is easy to think oh that was so long ago how is this relevant to this time and place. It is just as important today as these words were shared originally. We like to think we are so far removed and advanced from that time. Sad to say we are not. We are trapped in our humanness. We are trapped in our sinfulness. The encouragement is that we have Jesus. Jesus, who was sinless, died on the cross for you and for me. So the scriptures of so long ago are the same for us today. I often say we really are not much different from the Israelites wandering around the dessert. How short their memory was..... A short time ago they were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. Now they were free. They were God's chosen people on a journey. Yet how soon they forgot their slavery and complained. And complain

they did from the manna, to the walking, to the leader and we can even imagine so much more. And yet how much different are we? We have different clothes, different technology, different food and yet we lose sight of what we really have. We let our humanness take hold. The reminder to let go of self and lean into God is the everyday lesson. If we take one thing away from worship today is to let go of self and nurture our heart for service and compassion.

As I read and reflected on these scriptures these words resonated: listen / hear, redeemed / loved/ journey/ act / love / walk / speak / promise keeper and blessed.....

What also stood out in these words are those who were faithful to God's calling and God's presence in their lives. That God used everyday people.... Think of the examples included in the Micah passage: Moses, Aaron, Miriam. They were examples of answering a call to serve.

With this being Thankoffering Sunday and our focus on women think of the women in the life of Jesus and his ancestors: Mary, Martha, Sarah, Ruth, Naomi and so many more. There was Katarina von Bora, Martin Luther's spouse who was a pioneer in her own right..... Each has a story, each has a witness to God. Think of our church those faithful women who labored as silent saints working tirelessly to serve and ensure the mission went forward. I am sure you can think of some that you treasure from their example. Those who networked and had giving Tuesday and small business Saturday before any of that had a name. Yet they knew how to get things done. So we are thankful for their witness their boldness. I am thankful for the witnesses in my life who accepted me and affirmed my call and belovedness. I am thankful for our Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. Imagine how your service is an example and encouragement to others today. Your actions of love to others that you think is nothing special is an inspiration to someone who may never tell you. Keep serving.

The sermon on the mount also known as The Beatitudes, is a gospel story that we have heard many times. And when we have heard it many times we tend to tune out or think we know what it means. I challenge you to listen with new ears. Listen with ears for the message God has for you today. Not as some far off distant someday message. Often we listen to respond. I ask you to listen to reflect, to see how this matters to me and you, to our church, our community and our world.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and author wrote this regarding the beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit – not because of something that will happen to them later but because of what their poverty opens up in them right now. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness not because God is going to fill them up later but because their appetites are so fine tuned right now. The second half of the sentences still matter—the future promise still hold but the blessings in the first half are not deferred. Heaven begins now, for any saints willing to sign up.

She continues.... This is what the Beatitudes have to do with real life. They describe a view of reality in which the least likely candidates are revealed to be extremely fortunate in the divine economy of things, not only later but right now. They are Jesus' truth claims for all time, the basis of everything that follows, which everyone who hears them is free to accept, reject or neglect.... If you can breathe into it well, that's when heaven comes to earth, because earth is where heaven starts, for all who are willing to live into it right now.

These words again remind us that God's ways are not the way of the world, not the way of the rich and privileged. It is the upside down logic. The hot dog bun math. Anyone who has bought into our world's view of success cannot fathom happiness in being, poor, persecuted or marginalized. In my work as a chaplain I have the opportunity to journey with many people. I had the privilege to sit with a patient in John in his room. John had cancer and only a few months to live according to his prognosis. He was stand offish and really tried everything to push me away. I persisted. My gut told me he needed care. He said he did not need a chaplain. I said ok, I will turn my name tag around and I can sit with you. 45 minutes later John had a tear in his eye. I asked him why the tear. He said you listened to me. John felt heard. Someone listened to his story, to his pain, to his need to be recognized. The opportunity to journey with others is truly what we are called to do. To be with others in their time of pain. I pray that when you have needed care that someone has walked beside you and allowed you to have your value and worth recognized. That my brothers and sister is our true calling. How often do we let our to do lists, our tasks for meetings, our committees distract from truly being present with each other?

We live in challenging and strange times. Everyone seems to be an expert. Ask and you will get an earful. People are upset about everything from masks, to worship times, to shortages in grocery stores. And yet if we dig a little deeper what is the emotion all about? Just as the Israelites were grumbling in the

dessert; so too we grumble and it comes out with protests, complaints, blame and finger pointing. If we take a step back we can see that the real reason tied to these things are fear, loss of control, and a separation from God. Relying on self. And even Satan.

We live in the both and of life. It is never all good or all bad. That is the complexity of our lives. I like to believe I live in the reality. I accept the challenges and know that it is God that walks with me. It is how we respond to our challenges that define us. Anyone can live plan A. It is how we live plan b,c,d,e,f and all the way to z sometimes.

Henri Nouwen wrote Hope is the trust that God will fulfill God's promises to us in a way that leads us to true freedom. The optimist speaks about concrete changes in the future. The person of hope lives in the moment with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands. All the great spiritual leaders in history were people of hope. Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Mary, Jesus, Rumi, Gandhi and Dorothy Day all lived with a promise in their hearts that guided them toward the future without the need to know exactly what it would look like.

Perhaps you have heard the saying Toxic Positivity, Toxic positivity is an **obsession with positive thinking**. It is the belief that people should put a positive spin on all experiences, even those that are profoundly tragic. Toxic positivity can silence negative emotions, demean grief, and make people feel under pressure to pretend to be happy even when they are struggling. When you share with someone your pain and the response is everything will work out, or it will get better. The person who gives that response is dismissing the person's pain. We have the examples from Jesus to meet people where they are. Hear their story. Once we know the situation only then can we companion and respond as the hands and feet of Jesus. I try to find the positive, I try to look for the lesson but before I do that I have to admit the challenge. After I do that then I can move forward.

An example of this is when I provide support to staff at the hospital. I kept hearing from staff how they were trying to process. How to navigate all the loss, all the changes, all that was going on. I could not say oh, it will get better, be positive. That would be dismissing their feelings. I made this booklet for a class assignment. The class was providing pastoral and spiritual care in a disaster.

Appropriate timing. I shared to book with staff. Their responses were they felt heard and had a safe place to process.

The beatitudes are about living life now in the present not in the far away future. They acknowledge real life situations. Not in the endure this and you will get rewarded. Another counter cultural idea. May we learn to be examples of living the Beatitudes.

May we learn to be a compassionate presence to each other. What this world needs most is compassion. These gifts here about to be blessed and distributed are gifts of compassion.

Again Nouwen shares, Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human. Compassion can never coexist with judgement because judgement creates distance and distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other.

Joyce Rupp, whom I have had the privilege to train under teaches about living a compassionate life. She gave me language to what my heart felt and how I want to live my life. I pray that we can use scripture and examples from people we see everyday to live lives that offer hope and comfort to all. Joyce shared these words: Compassionate One, the amount of suffering in our world appears to insurmountable, but the amount of kindheartedness is equally vast. It is easy to forget this. Let us give thanks for those who embody your love and let us be willing to share it. May it be so Amen!