

"Foolishly Blessed" A sermon based on Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12 and 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 delivered by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young on Sunday, February 1, 2026 at the First Congregational UCC of Onkama, Michigan.

This sermon could just as easily have been named "Blessed Foolishness," for what I want to bring across to you today speaks of both being what the Apostle Paul calls a "fool for Christ" and what the gospel of Matthew records in what has traditionally been called "The Beatitudes" (lat. *The blessed*) as being "blessed." For many of us in this modern world, the Beatitudes appear to be foolish statements. How can it be a blessing to be poor in spirit, or persecuted, or hungry, or be in mourning, or be reviled? How, in short, can it be a blessing to appear to be a fool? Although what I am going to share with you now is not an answer to this question, I hope it will provide a glimpse into the truth of being what I have dubbed "foolishly blessed."

What do we usually think of when we think of a fool? Perhaps, you think of a clown. Perhaps, you think of a court jester from days of old, or even, more sadly and falsely, you might think of someone who is mentally differently abled. What sets these individuals apart from the other more "normal" individuals in our society? Well, one thing that does set them apart is that they are somewhat protected by their foolishness. Think about it. If you doubt what I am saying, consider the clown at a circus. A circus clown is able to say outrageous things to people in the audience and throw buckets of water (or, more often, confetti) at them and not suffer the "normal" consequences. Or, think of the comic strip, "The Wizard of Id." The court jester there, named "Bung" of all things, is able to say all kinds of scandalous things to his diminutive king without being executed. Oh, he spends a good deal of time in the dungeon for it, but he is always released again. Think too of Shakespeare, who used fools in his marvelous plays for this very reason. The fools in Shakespeare's plays could speak truth to the

king and people in power without necessarily losing their heads! Fools or persons that we see as being differently abled can say things to people that you or I could not say, because they are most often protected by their "role," in the case of the clown or the court jester, and by their perceived "abnormal" different way of thinking, in the case of the differently abled.

In short, society allows what we might term as "fools" to speak their truth without penalty, and it allows them to do this because they are seen as being powerless. And yet, what our Gospel lesson this morning is saying is just the opposite.

Contemporary theologian, preacher, and author, Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, Home By Another Way, helps us with this seeming paradox. She points out that the Beatitudes, in their topsy-turvy world view, were meant, through their shock value to, among other things, wake-up Jesus' disciples and the common people of Jesus' time to the reality of God's sacred promises to them. She says that the Beatitudes have lost their shock value for us because they are now out of context. She points out that if we said, "Blessed are you who suffer from cancer, for you shall be made whole," or "Blessed are you whose prayers are not answered, for you shall see the God face to face," (p. 54) that we might actually sit-up and take notice!

The mistake modern listeners make, Taylor notes, is that we tend to see the Sermon on the Mount (or the Sermon on the Plain, in the case of Luke's gospel) as giving us advice. And this is where we are wrong. Taylor explains it this way in the chapter of her book entitled "God's Ferris Wheel:"

The catch is, the beatitudes are not advice. There is nothing about them that remotely suggests Jesus was telling anyone what he thought they should do . . . Instead, he describes different kinds of people, hoping that his listeners will recognize themselves as one kind or another, and then he makes the same promise to all of them: that the way things are is not the way they will always be. The Ferris wheel will go around, so that those who are swaying at the top, with the wind in

their hair and all the world's lights at their feet, will have their turn at the bottom, while those who are down there right now, where all they can see are candy wrappers in the sawdust, will have the chance to touch the stars. It is not advice at all. It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone on that wheel, (p. 55)

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote this several years ago. If she were writing today, she might have a more up-to-date list for our current socio-political context. Maine poet and pastor Stephen Garnass-Holmes wrote a list like that this week in the form of a poem in his devotional "Unfolding Light" entitled "Beatitudes for the Street:"

*"Blessed are you who are vulnerable or undocumented,  
for you belong to God.  
Blessed are you who are pepper-sprayed,  
for your eyes see most clearly.  
Blessed are you who respond to brutality with kindness,  
for kindness alone will change the world.  
Blessed are you who are neighborly amid terror,  
for you are at home with God.  
Blessed are you who protest injustice,  
for this is God's voice.  
Blessed are you who shoot with cameras instead of guns,  
for so does God.  
Blessed are you who are harassed and arrested,  
for you are most at peace, and most free.  
Blessed are you who are shot or maimed,  
for so they treated the martyrs before you.  
Blessed are you who are despised and deported,  
for so God's beloved are always treated,  
yet you never leave God's loving home."*

What our gospel is saying then, is that all of us are blessed, **every one**, and that it is not about power at all. It is about grace. Even those whom the world labels as "fools" are inheritors of the promises of God, and through that grace they gain the power to gain eternal life. For it hardly sounds powerless, even to our modern ears, to inherit the earth and the

kingdom of heaven, to receive mercy, to be filled with food, to be called children of God, to be rewarded greatly in heaven, and finally, and most stunning of all, to see God. Those who give themselves up to their belief in God, the Beatitudes are saying, may seem to be the underlings in society the poor, the persecuted, the hungry, the fools, but these are the heirs of Gods blessings, as are we all.

In an article entitled "Shirleys Cross" from an old issue of Christian Century, author J. Marshall Jenkins, describes such a blessed one. He tells of his friend, Shirley, who is a nun cloistered in a convent. She is crippled with diabetes and suffers from manic depressive disease, but through it all, is blessed indeed:

I can tell when the nights are getting long for Shirley: I begin to get letters. Shirleys letters tell of moments of grace in the convent community where she lives. . . . Her letters also describe sleepless nights. Diabetes and time do not treat Shirleys body kindly. . . . Loneliness haunts her. ..Shirley is a short, chunky woman with twinkling hazel eyes I see her two or three times a year when she makes the long trip home. She drops by and shares laughter at herself and at her life of worrying over a problem toilet, tending the garden, entertaining strangers and angels, celebrating the Eucharist. Her hearty laughter heals like chicken soup. It's an antidote for her loneliness and a nourishing sound for my loneliness. . . . She'll be the first to tell you that nobody needs loneliness, yet something in her new life hallows it. . . . This is foolishness, of course, and Shirleys laughter and letters display a special appreciation for the foolishness of the cross....Shirley's laughter and letters suggest that the cross of Christ is the power of God at work in her life. In some domain deeper and more basic than the world of competition and acquisition, Shirley has her inheritance. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," Jesus said, with Shirley in mind...." (p. 43)

Shirley is blessed, Jenkins reminds us, not because of her good works, but because of her belief in God that underpins those good works, a belief that she holds against all odds and when probably looking like a fool. For the truth is, that the Beatitudes describe all of us. When we look in the mirror,

we can see the fools that we all are there, if we look hard enough. It is as simple as that. And so are the promises of God.

If we are still not satisfied, however, and crave advice on how to live. That was already given most succinctly some seven hundred years before Christ's birth in a question posed by the prophet Micah to a people who believed that some empty rituals would get them into God's good graces. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good;" Micah admonishes, "and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (v. 8). What could be clearer than that? So, let us go out from here and do just that in all the many ways that we are able. In this context, I always look to the late President Jimmy Carter's wise advice: "I have one life and one chance to make it count for something... My faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can, with whatever I have, to try to make a difference." Amen.