

"Well, Bless Your Heart!"
A Epiphany Four; Matthew 5:1-12
January 29, 2017
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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I. GOD SHOWS THROUGH

One Sunday as they drove home from church, a little girl turned to her mother and said, "Mommy, there's something about the preacher's message this morning that I don't understand." The mother said, "Oh? What is it?" The little girl replied, "Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. He said God is so big that He could hold the whole world in His hand. Is that true?"

The mother replied, "Yes, that's true, honey." "But Mommy, he also said that God comes to live inside of us when we ask Jesus into our hearts. Is that true, too?" Again, the mother assured the little girl that what the pastor had said was true. With a puzzled look on her face the little girl then asked, "If God is bigger than us and He lives in us, wouldn't He **show through**?"

That is what the beatitudes are about - God showing through.
(Jerry Shirley, When God Shows Through)

II. WHERE DOES GOD SHOW THROUGH YOU?

So, imagine, for a moment, that you are hanging out with Jesus, traipsing around The Galilee. Perhaps you've just been out on a boat ride of the Sea of Galilee—really more of a "lake." Everywhere you look, huge crowds are starting to gather around. Wanting Jesus' attention. Needing Jesus' care. It's getting a bit overwhelming—for him *and* for you.

And Jesus, seeing all the throngs chasing you down once again, whispers, Hey! Come with me. Let's hike up that hill and have a quiet picnic. Maybe a campfire. I want to talk to you. And you jump at the chance, and trek up the hill, leaving the crowds behind. Jesus spots a quiet place and you sit down and he begins to tell you the Story of You.

- 3 "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.
- 4 "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.
- 5 "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.
- 6 "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.
- 7 "You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.
- 8 "You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.
- 9 "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.
- 10 "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.
- 11-12 "Not only that—count yourself 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.

You are blessed! It's not conditional. Not, "If you are humble, faithful, poor in spirit, meek, or a peacemaker, only *then* will you be blessed. You.already.are. It's a fact. Just as much a fact as "you are a beloved child of God." All of you. Every last one of you. Of us. Every one of God's children on this earth.

III. ANNUAL CELEBRATION OF US!

Today we gather for one purpose—all of us prophets and witnesses to God's light. You *thought* it was for a regular church service at the end of the January, followed by that necessary chore of this time of year: The Annual Meeting.

That "thing to be gotten through"—hopefully on a "Bye Week" so we're not missing a big game! Hopefully without too much kerfuffle, that "**should**" when we better show up so we can talk about the budget, and do all the formalities of installing officers and making decisions that our By-laws require.

Actually, though, that is not our true purpose. We might (well, we better!) accomplish those things along the way, but what what we gather for today is so much bigger than a business meeting. And a church service.

For today is when we tell the Story of Us. The Story of CUCC and how our Beloved Community is blessed. And is, has been and will be a Blessing with God in our hearts and God showing through out into the lives and places around us.

IV. WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE WORLD?

Judy Hassell, Marge Erickson and I spent the weekend with religious scholar and religious landscape observer, Diana Butler Bass.

Bass showed us several statics—charts and bar graphs—stuff we've all heard before about how the Church—or "organized religion" as we like to call it, is declining all over the place. Not just "mainline protestant churches like us, but evangelical churches, and really, so-called religious practice of many kind.

But then, there was a turn in the conversation. Why? Because statistics are only one stream of information, can be interpreted countless ways and don't tell the whole story. Or even the right one.

Why? Because we *choose* the way we tell *our* story. "That's my story and I'm sticking to it!" can be a shutting down our ears and digging our heels in the sand. OR, it can be a profound statement of faith. "This is my story. My song. How I tell my story. Or, how we tell our story as a community, can totally buck the tide of those statistics and give the story a different ending.

Bass sees not a death-knell or a gloom and doom ending for life and faith as we know it, but an Awakening on the horizon. For human beings are *not* losing their connections to God and one another, but experiencing God and the life of faith in community in profound, new and exciting ways.

People might not be "in church" as much as once upon a time, but deeply spiritual experiences—with loving God and neighbor—are happening all around us; every day in the places and situations we least expect.

And Jesus says to that, "Let's celebrate! You are blessed! We are blessed! In far more ways than you realize! When you find God inside the church doors, when you find God on the

mountainside on a picnic with Jesus or around a campfire. When you feed the hungry and clothe the naked. When you stand up to evil and stand with those who have no standing. Speak for those who have no voice.

Today we tell *this* story. The story of US, and how we *are* blessed. And *are* a blessing—changing lives and shining light. The Church –universal and here in Buena Vista, Colorado—is *not* “in decline.” The Church—Christ’s Beloved Community—his very Body—hands and feet of Jesus—is blessed! And blessing all over the place!

V. WRITING OUR STORY

After Dr. Butler Bass presented these statistics and charts and “the facts”, we all started looking for signs of the “Awakening.” The Spiritual Revolution that is on the horizon. The new story that we write together as blessed people of God and disciples of Jesus.

Diana challenged us, as congregations, not to stop doing anything we’re doing that is nurturing our spiritual and worship life, honoring the traditions, anchoring our souls.

But, to “Add stuff around the edges”...

Well, Judy grabbed her iPad and had an epiphany in that moment! “Add stuff around the edges? Don’t we already do that?!” And she started to make a list of everything we as a congregation do “around the edges.” We’re doing it! Maybe our “awakening” is not about doing *more* but waking up and smelling the coffee (or grape juice or wine!) and see with new, bright eyes, what is already happening here!

It honestly took us all the way home from Boulder to make this list because it was so long. AND, we know we didn’t get everything! There are places where people do ministry and participate in significant acts of service that we’re not even aware of! Or, apologies to you in advance, might have forgotten.

I want to share this LIST with you and then encourage you to add to it. For today, we celebrate the Story of Us as a congregation and continue writing that Story into the coming year. Celebrating every bit—every ray of light that shines out through us from God.

VI. WHAT HAPPENS HERE

What happens here—both at the heart and around the edges of this Beloved Community: (in no particular order):

Hiking & skiing club, Tells women’s book group, WMS, WMS breakfast club (starting soon!), Intergenerational Mission trip, Celtic service, Journey to Life Grief group, Adult Sunday School, Coffee Hour conversation, Worship services, Kids’ Sunday school, Nursery activities and care, Vacation Bible school, Chancel Choir, MSG (musical support group), Elevation Band, Knack Attacks, Prayer Shawls, Soup Ministry, Communion for Shut-ins, Backpack Food program,

Community use of building, Charter and support of Scout Troop 67, Ministry of the Church Van, Lenten Services with Grace Church, Community Forums with Christian Science and Methodist and Presbyterian communities; Pastoral Care Team, Card Ministry, Meals, Countless projects and ministries undertaken by the boards, committees and Council: CE, Diaconate, Trustees, M&M, Stewardship (time, Talent and Treasure!), Communications ministries: monthly newsletter (including voices from all ages and circles), weekly email blasts, prayer chains, CUCC page and connecting with community on Facebook, articles for newspaper, weddings, funerals for members and non, habitat, free clothing, shoes, toiletries, mission, Angelo, our sponsored young man in the Philippines, Fair trade coffee/Holy Joes mission, Conference/Association work by delegates and others, Annual all-church Bazaar, All-Church and ages Christmas program, Easter services and Breakfast, Youth service board, pies for 4th of July, pig skin pig out, hosting educational events for and with the wider community.

Social Sunday, Special offerings (UCC and others), pray-ers, ushers & greeters, camps and retreats for all ages; hospital visits near and far, homebound visits, continual beautification of the grounds, snow removal and other maintenance, music & drama ministries beyond our doors and worship services.

VII. BLESSED ARE WE, CUCC!

Blessed are we, every time even an *ounce* of effort is given to one of these ministries, and those not even mentioned here. Every time we take “they’ll know we are Christians by our love” literally— in ways too many to count—both inside our doors as we welcome and come together as a very diverse, eclectic and downright “misfit” bunch of pilgrims on a journey together.

And, as we reach out into our community, across socio-economic, political and generational lines too many to count.

Blessed are you, when you come to the Table, show up, be counted. When you keep coming to the Table, even when it’s hard. When you’ve been hurt, or your ideas and hopes are not heard or honored. When you are discouraged by the statistics, by the lack of volunteers; when the challenges seem to outweigh the joys.

Blessed are you, when you listen to each other’s hearts. Hear one another’s stories. Carry each other’s joys, concerns and struggles on the faith journey. When you draw ever-more chairs to the Table. Draw the circle wider so that all can find a place—embracing new styles of music, worship, gathering. When you stretch in order to connect—even out of your own comfort zone.

Blessed are you, CUCC individuals and groups, when you step-in and step-up, answering the call to serve! On a Board, a committee, as Chair, as Secretary or Council Rep or worker-bee.

Blessed are we as a congregation! Countless people feel the nudge and answer the call from Jesus to fish. To reach out, connect with people, touch one another’s lives in meaningful

ways—with presence, with sharing their gifts of time, talent and treasure.

Bless your heart! Bless you every time you let God’s light show through. Every situation in each moment of every day that love wins because God lives in you and me and

“God is bigger than us and She lives in us, and God *has* to show through!” That’s our Story and we’re sticking to it!

Rejoice, and be glad! Blessed are you; holy are you!
Rejoice and be glad! Yours is the kingdom of God!
Let us sing, celebrate this day of telling our story. Let us be grateful and enjoy one another as a church family, and rejoice!
Amen.