

2020 02 02 - Blessed

Matthew 5:1-12

I'm going to start today with a bit of survey... how many of you have a subscription to Broadview? How many of you know that Broadview is the new name of the Observer – the United Church magazine that last year celebrated 190 years of continuous publication? Well I have had a subscription for the last 30 years or so and now I even receive regular emails and quite often visit the Broadview website to read recent articles. If you are interested in topics such as spirituality, justice and ethical living, this magazine is a great resource.

Just this week I read a fascinating and disturbing article about a young woman named Megan Rolfe. Here's part of her story:

When Megan Rolfe was 18 and in her first year of college in London, Ont., her struggles with depression took a sharp turn, and she found herself gripped by suicidal thoughts. After attempts at taking her life in both 2012 and 2013, she packed up her bags and went home to her family. But she didn't seek out a therapist.

Instead, Rolfe threw herself into work, hoping the distraction might help alleviate some of her symptoms. "I didn't want to be the only one of my friends who was going to therapy," says Rolfe. "I thought maybe it was something that time could change."

A few years later, Rolfe got a job in hospitality and moved out to Lake Louise, Alta., where she fell in love with the mountains and came to view spending time in nature, and specifically hiking, as a form of therapy. Still, she continued to struggle with her mental health — and was now far away from family support — so she started to look for help.

Tiny Lake Louise, where the wintertime population can shrink to just 500, has one psychologist accessible through the public health-care system. When Rolfe called his office, she was told she'd have to wait several weeks for an appointment. When she finally got one, she was prescribed anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medications. But the psychologist could only meet with Rolfe every couple of months after that, and private care in nearby Canmore, Alta., was prohibitively expensive. "I didn't know what I was looking for," Rolfe says. "[Therapy wasn't accessible], so I just put it on the back burner."

Later, Rolfe moved to Canmore, where she decided to wean herself off her medications. Then, two months later, she was out hiking and suddenly became disoriented. She walked right off a ledge and fell nearly two metres, narrowly escaping serious injury. "I couldn't see straight, I was crying and nothing was going on that caused it," says Rolfe. "It was a massive panic attack at the top of a mountain. That's when I realized I needed to see somebody." But with a net monthly income of about \$2,800, it was hard to afford the help she required.

<https://broadview.org/canada-affordable-mental-health/>

The article goes on to explain that “Rolfe is just one of 6.7 million Canadians who struggle with mental health, many of whom are unable to access affordable and timely mental health-care options. . . The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) estimates that 50 percent of Canadians will have or have had some form of mental illness — anything from schizophrenia to an anxiety disorder — by the age of 40. However, in 2015 governments dedicated only 7.2 percent of health-care funding to mental health.” In my thirties, when I went through my own mental health crisis, I was lucky. I had a large enough income that I could afford to pay \$100 an hour for weekly sessions. These days private therapy can cost twice that much.

You may be sitting there thinking... what does mental health care have to do with today's scripture reading? Today we have listened to and we have also sung, the beatitudes, the list of blessings that Jesus spoke at the beginning of his famous sermon on the mount. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are poor in spirit... Blessed are those who are mourning... Blessed are those who are gentle ... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice..” and he goes on and gives four more blessings.

There are many ways of interpreting the beatitudes. The first thing we have to do is determine who Jesus is talking about. For instance, what does it mean to be “poor in spirit?” Most scholars agree that “poor in spirit” does not mean lacking in courage or zeal or even religious awareness. Rather, it emphasizes the impact that poverty can have not only on our physical condition but also on our spiritual health. Jesus was talking about the poor.

Phttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_5:3

Poverty is just one of the ways that people are marginalized in our society. Jesus doesn't try to list them all. Brendan Freeman, a Trappist monk from Iowa, says that the Beatitudes "are deliberately incomplete. They await the inclusion of our lives. Each person fills in the blank space with the details of his or her own life situation." <https://www.religion-online.org/article/be-happy-micah-61-8-matthew-51-12/> For instance, Megan Rolfe, might say, "Blessed are those who are mentally ill: they will have the resources they need for healing." Laura Budd, who spoke to us last October, might say, "Blessed are those who are transgender: they will be affirmed and supported." We can all insert our own stories.

I believe that the beatitudes are directly connected to the topic of last week's sermon. I believe that Jesus' blessings are a road map for the kingdom of heaven, that they describe the reign of God's peace and justice on earth. We already know that in the kingdom of God everything in this world gets turned upside down! In God's realm those people that society has placed on the margins will be truly blessed. Those who seem to have no reason in this world for hope or joy, those who have been deprived of their fair share of goodness and fairness—these are the ones for whom God's justice and peace are incredible gifts.

<http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2011/02/secret-of-happiness-micah-68-psalm-15.html>

So where are you on Jesus' road map? Where do you fit? Do you need to fill in the blank and create a new blessing or do you slide right in to one of Jesus' original beatitudes? Maybe you feel like you don't fit at all. My guess is that most of us move around on the map. Sometimes we are the ones needing healing, support, comfort, or affirmation. Sometimes we are the ones who are fighting for justice and who are working for peace in the world. Sometimes we

are the ones that don't fit on the list; we are the ones who still need to develop, our humility, our compassion and our courage so that we can let go and let God work in our lives. No matter where we fit on Jesus' road map, we can all be a part of creating God's reign on earth.

One of the great things about the Broadview magazine is that its articles not only highlight the issues that face our world, they also provide stories of inspiration and hope. In the December 2019 issue, the same issue where I found Megan's story, there was another article about a counselling practice in Toronto called Hard Feelings. Instead of paying up to \$200 an hour for counselling at the market rate, patients at Hard Feelings can receive an hour of care for \$50 to \$80. The social worker who created the practice says, "We are not the solution. There are huge systemic issues, but in the interim we can at least provide some access." <https://broadview.org/toronto-hard-feelings/>

And in last October's issue, there is an amazing story of a town in Belgium called Geel. People have travelled to Geel for centuries in the hope of experiencing miracle cures for their mental illnesses. Geel is the home of St. Dymphna, the patron saint of mental illness. Her tragic story is also included in the article. But the most incredible thing about Geel is that the people there take the mentally ill into their own homes and treat them as family. Today, 232 boarders live in Geel with 187 families. The focus is on a normal daily life in an average family, out of institutions. <https://broadview.org/geel-belgium-mental-health/>

With programs like these, God's realm of peace and justice is already being built. So what can you do? Where do you fit? How are you blessed?