



# FROM THE PULPIT

## *North Shore Congregational Church*

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### *“Blessed Are You”*

**Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching**

*Matthew 5: 1-12; Luke 12: 22-34*

*February 7, 2016*

Hope! As I read through these Beatitudes and reflected on their message for us today – I simply kept going back to that same word. Hope! I’m not sure there is anything more powerful that Scripture has to offer to our day-to-day lives than hope!

For obvious reasons, I spend a fair amount of time in conversation with individuals who are running head on into the challenges of life. And, I find that, by far, the most common need for these people is hope! I find that the most consistent burden that people bear in the midst of life’s challenges, the most daunting psycho-emotional hurdle that they need to overcome is, in fact, not the worry that they have, the problem they can’t solve, or the stress they can’t shake, but the lack of hope they hold for their circumstances. Simply stated, we do not carry, often enough, a confident expectation of the fulfillment of the promises of God in the world in which you and I live our lives.

We are a culture of problem-solvers. When we encounter trials, challenges or problems in our lives, the immediate goal we set is to ‘solve’ the problem.

- If we encounter a problem in our health, the goal is to heal.
- If we confront a problem in our marriage, the goal becomes to fix it.
- If we have a problem with our finances, the goal is to resolve it.

This is all straight-forward and sensible. Clearly the ultimate goal, when we confront problems, is to fix them – to resolve whatever the issue, concern, stress or difficulty may be. That’s all well and good. The challenge, for us, does not enter with our desire to solve problems. The challenge enters with the fact that we make our emotional and spiritual contentment and health dependent on reaching that point of resolution. You see, the challenge is not that we want to solve our problems – of course we do! The challenge is that we put such weight and importance on solving our problems that our entire happiness – our very contentment in life – becomes contingent upon reaching that point of resolution. The inherent result of this, however, is that we end up defining the solution to our problems as that which is missing in our lives – if we could just solve our problems, if we could just resolve our issues, if we could just fix those things, we

will finally know peace, and joy, and love. And, that becomes the greatest problem of all. The challenge that arises, in all of this, is that we focus so heavily on the need to reach that end goal of resolution, that we never realize that what we really need is not to have everything solved (because, if nothing else, by now we have learned that we never will!), but to understand that there is a promise for a better tomorrow than we know today.

That's hope – I think the Biblical notion of hope is a confident expectation that, through the grace and providence of God, we are on a road towards a more peaceful tomorrow. And, if we would only start looking for that – if we would only start looking for hope in the midst of our trials – instead of looking for the utopian perfection of having every problem solved – I contend that we would find a much greater peace and joy in our lives. There is nothing I find myself more consistently trying to communicate with people in need than that – the truth that contentment and peace isn't found in the resolution to all our problems (a reality that never actually comes to fruition), but, instead, that contentment comes in the hope that, in God, tomorrow can be better than today!

The contemporary scene in which you and I live has too many negatives in it, we know that. We know that there's too much violence. There is too much exploitation, there is too much looking out for ourselves without regard for the expense and the cost to others as we do that. It's become almost a cliché to talk about the fact that we can't watch 2 minutes of the evening news without being confronted with the dysfunction that surround us. We all know, intimately, that we are surrounded by problems – both in the world around us and in our own lives.

Despite our genuine gratitude we have for God's blessings in our lives, we can't ignore the reality that there are often things in our lives that make them less than we long for them to be. There are those circumstances that are part of our living situations - in our homes, in our workplaces, in our communities, in our world – that do not meet the standards of what we see to be the ideal for God's creation. There's no argument from anyone on that. The problem, however, arises in that focus we place on solving the problems, and the contentment and peace we make contingent upon that utopian resolution that we never seem to find.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.” These words from Jesus, that we read from Luke, are the very essence of the Beatitudes in Matthew.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek...6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...7 Blessed are the merciful...8 Blessed are the pure in heart...9 Blessed are the peacemakers...10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness...11 Blessed are you.”

Blessed are we!

- Blessed are we, because we have the promises of God.
- Blessed are we because, no matter what we face, we know that we can trust in God for a better tomorrow.
- Blessed are we, because we have the hope of God – the confident expectation that God's grace and providence will lead us on a path that means tomorrow can be better than today!

That's hope! That's the peace and joy that God offers us in our times of need. But, it's not until we recognize that what we need is not solutions, but a genuine trust in the promises of God in our lives – it's not until we realize that our loss of that expectation for God's promises is why we sink into the darkness of our despair – it's not until we embrace that truth, that we can begin to imagine a remedy not to all our problems, but to our very need to have solutions before we can have happiness.

Paul said to the Romans (this is from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter), "May God, the source of hope," (The God who promises that there is an answer to the questions that we're asking, the God who promises that there is a solution to the unworkable equation of our human condition), "May God, the source of hope fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him." "May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit." To the people of Paul's time, who were living lives with problems much akin to what we know today, Paul proclaims that faith in God – trust in God's presence and power in our lives and in our world – is the very manner in which hope enters into our lives and peace and joy are discovered. Not through solutions, not through fixes, and not through utopian perfection – through trust in God's promises to us.

Despite our focus on problem-solving, the truth is that, in the vast majority of our times of despair, what is standing in the way of our peace, what we're missing, what we are lacking, is hope! Not solutions, not answers, not an end to all problems that we know, but an understanding that our trust in God gives hope – hope that God is at work in our world and that our tomorrow does not rely solely in our hands, but in the grace of God's love enacted and made real in our lives.

"May God, the source of hope fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him." Life will have its problems – things will go awry – and our immediate response will be to focus on the fix because we think that is the path to peace and joy in life. The promise of faith, however, is that we never need to wait that long. The promise of faith is that joy and peace are ours today – not in the resolution to every problem we know and every challenge we face – but in the confident expectation of the fulfillment of God's promises – in the hope that in God, no matter what we are facing, God is at work in and around us, and tomorrow can be better than today!