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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5:1-12  
First Presbyterian Church  
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*Blessed*

When Jesus calls your name—when you get out of your boat, drop your nets on the shore, leave your old way of living behind and start to follow him—well, things change. *You* change. You pay attention to what he says and does. And when he talks about how things will be when God’s reign comes in its fullness, you get caught up in this vision of how things *ought* to be even here and now. You want it so badly you can almost taste it. You want to be someone whose attitudes and values are shaped by all that Jesus says and does, someone who lives in ways that allow the light of God to shine through into this poor old bruised and battered world.

Sometimes when we read the Beatitudes, we hear them as a “job description” for those who follow Jesus. We are to comfort those who mourn, to be merciful to others, to be peacemakers, and so forth. They become a checklist, a standard for us to aspire to, something to achieve through our own effort... something where we get to say, “Look at me, God! Look at the great things I have done for you!”

But that’s not really what Jesus had in mind here. Now don’t misunderstand me—comforting the brokenhearted, showing mercy to those who need it, making peace where there is strife: those are all wonderful things to do. Those are all things we *should* be doing as followers of Christ. But the original Greek makes it clear that these words of Jesus are not commands to be performed so much as descriptions of what it means to be a follower of Christ. When you take that first step on the road with Jesus, you have also taken the first step on being transformed by his light and his love.

When that happens, you become poor in spirit, because you know how much you need God, how much the world needs God. Your heart is broken and you grieve when you look around you and see how sin has corrupted what God created and intended to be good. You know your own limitations in setting things right—know them all too well—even as you pray and do what you can to make things better.

You stop asking yourself who is ahead in the race to acquire “the most” and begin asking yourself: How can what I say and do bring honor and glory to God? How can what I say and do give respect and dignity to the image of God I encounter in every person I meet? You show mercy because you know how much mercy you have received. You make peace, because you know how God has made peace with you, in and through Jesus Christ. And you live this way with a singleness of heart and purpose, loving God with all your being, loving your neighbor as much as you love yourself. When the reign of God takes root in your heart and your life, you can’t help being changed, being transformed by its values and its priorities.

When that happens, Jesus promises us two things. The first is that we are already blessed when our lives become places where the light of God’s love shines through, not because of what we *do* but because of who we are and—most of all—*who we belong to*. Knowing what God has done for you, knowing God’s presence with you, knowing God’s love living in and through you—those are blessings already, in the here and now, not some pie-in-the-sky promise for when we are dead and gone.

The second thing Jesus tells us is that living this way will get us in trouble. “Blessed are you,” he says, “when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” This way of *being* is so radically different from a life based on getting and keeping and defending what you’ve got that you might as well be ready for others to

misunderstand you, to go after you, to try to destroy you because they feel so threatened. But what they say and what they do doesn't change the fact, Jesus says, that you are still blessed. It's what they've always done. It's what they always will do, until the God's reign comes in its fullness.

Sometimes it's hard to see what living a blessed life looks like. Dominique Greene was a young man who grew up in the inner city without any of the advantages. His mother—the only parent in the home—was mentally ill and abused Dominique and his younger brothers. Dominique would often step in to take whatever punishment his mother thought his brothers deserved, to spare the younger boys the pain, because his mother could be vicious when she was enraged. There were times when he could scarcely walk because of the beatings he had endured.

She was barely able to hold a job, any job, and so when he was just a very young teenager, Dominique began looking for ways to help take care of her and his brothers. He was no angel. Sometimes that meant a little petty theft. Sometimes it meant being a delivery boy for a drug dealer. A lot of his friends did the same sort of things—you did what you had to in order to get by.

And then one evening, when Dominique was hanging out with some of his friends, a convenience store robbery went awry. Shots were fired and a man died. Dominique admitted he was present but insisted he was not the shooter and the surveillance tape would prove his innocence, but that tape was never entered into evidence—it just “disappeared” after the other boys involved worked out a plea bargain. Instead, Dominique—the only one of the boys who couldn't afford his own lawyer—was charged with murder, found guilty, and sentenced to die.

I don't know if Dominique Greene pulled the trigger that night. What I can say, based on his own writings and the testimonies of those who knew him well, is that Dominique at 28 was

not the same as the kid who had entered Death Row ten years before. Then, he was tough-talking, filled with bravado, swaggering to conceal his fear, and incredibly naïve about the criminal justice system which had just claimed him and his future. But at 28, he was mature beyond his years, a person of deep faith who consistently brought light and hope to those he encountered, including his lawyers, journalists, political activists, family members of the victim, other Death Row inmates, and even a number of his prison guards. For someone unable to leave the narrow bounds of the Texas prison where he was housed, his influence spread out in ripples around the world.

That transformation didn't happen overnight, of course. At first, Dominique's decision to educate himself mostly sprang from his desire to get someone, anyone, to pay attention to him and his story, so that his appeals might be heard. His early letters from prison are mostly pleas for help in getting the conviction reversed. But Dominique came to see that one gift—one blessing—his sentence gave him was the time to read, to learn, to think about life. And over time, his writing and speaking styles became more polished, more sophisticated, and more thoughtful.

He read law, of course, but he also read philosophy, science, mathematics, and theology. He read the Bible, day after day. And the little seed of faith that had been sown somewhere along the way began to grow and blossom. He was especially taken with Archbishop Desmond Tutu's writings about forgiveness and reconciliation in South Africa in the wake of apartheid, and he began to apply what the Archbishop had said to his own life. Eventually, he started talking and working with others there in the prison about those things, too—about how to forgive those who had wronged you, how to ask for forgiveness of those you had wronged. And in that, he found a deep and abiding faith that would sustain him and encourage others throughout the

rest of his life. When you look at a photo of him from those years, you cannot miss the light in his eyes, the peace in his beautiful brown countenance. The transformation was so complete that even the victim's family begged for the death sentence not to be carried out because it would be a travesty, given the man Dominique Greene had become. He was, in the words of author Thomas Cahill, who told his story, "a saint on Death Row."<sup>1</sup>

But those pleas fell on deaf ears. Dominique Greene was executed by lethal injection on October 26, 2004, in the Texas prison where he spent so much of his brief life.

Dominique was Catholic, and he prayed every day. But his rosary became more than "just" a rosary.<sup>2</sup> In an essay published only two weeks before his death, he talked about how he had made it himself, bead by bead. The beads stood for those who had helped him and for those whom he had been able to help.. Every time one of his brothers on Death Row was executed he added another bead, until there were more than 100. He gave thanks for the gifts he had received from each one and prayed for them all by name, every single day. Gratitude for what he had received and for what he had been able to do to help another see the light filled his heart.

Most of us wouldn't say that Dominique—or anyone on Death Row—was "blessed," at least not in the way that the world usually understands that word. But the Beatitudes point to something different, and I think he might have understood more about the consolation these words offer than most of us ever will. Even when people doubted his sincerity, even when old lies and half-truths were trotted out at each appeal, even when it became clear that the system was more interested in killing him than in rehabilitation, Dominique Greene held fast to the work of forgiveness and reconciliation. And he held fast to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Cahill, *A Saint on Death Row* (Anchor, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Dominique Greene, "More Than Just a Rosary," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 15, 2004.

“How happy are those who give up their trust in themselves and learn to trust God.”<sup>3</sup>

Dominique Greene came to that trust on Death Row and he chose to be a blessing, his life a place where God’s love and light could shine through, even there. May his example inspire us and help us to trust God so deeply that we will know ourselves to be blessed, wherever we may be, whatever challenges we may face. May God’s love and light shine in us and through us, too. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Topolewski, *The Minister’s Annual Manual* (Logos Productions, 2010), 237.