

“I’d Like To Hear a Sermon About: The Beatitudes”
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Matthew 5: 1 – 12

- ¹When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
³“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, for they will inherit the earth.
⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
 for they will be filled.
⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,
 for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The question that led to today’s sermon wasn’t just about the Beatitudes. It was about the Beatitudes for the 21st Century.

And that’s a great question.

Because of all the passages in the Bible, there are few that are as central, and few that are as difficult for us to grasp, because they speak of a world so different from our own. Mercy? Persecuted? Hungering and Thirsting? Poor? Mourning?

It’s not a little shift from what we’re used to hearing, thinking, hoping, working.... it’s a 180-degree turn, a move to another hemisphere.

And because it’s such a shift, such a change in perspective, they aren’t that easy to understand. What is Jesus telling us to do? What do they, exactly, mean?

James Howell, a Methodist pastor in Charlotte, wrote a wonderful book about this passage of scripture, entitled “The Beatitudes for Today,”

In it, he suggests that if we want to understand the Beatitudes, we should start by asking what they DON’T say.

Jesus didn't say:¹

- Blessed are those who climb the corporate ladder;
they will be blessed with a comfortable retirement.
- Blessed are those born into fine families; they will enjoy countless advantages.
- Blessed are those who shop; they will own neat things.
- Blessed are those with a fine education.
- Blessed are the good-looking, blessed are those who satisfy their desires.
- Blessed are those who have what they need, seem happy, live in great neighborhoods, have some amount of power and control over their lives.

Jesus says none of those things.

What does Jesus say?

I'll let writer Frederick Buechner offer his interpretation²:

If we didn't already know but were asked to guess the kind of people Jesus would pick out for special commendation, we might be tempted to guess one sort or another of spiritual heromen and women of impeccable credentials morally, spiritually, humanly, and every which way. If so, we would be wrong. Maybe those aren't the ones he picked out because he felt they didn't need the shot in the arm his commendation would give them. Maybe they're not the ones he picked out because he didn't happen to know any. Be that as it may, it's worth noting the ones he did pick out.

Not the spiritual giants, but the "poor in spirit," as he called them, the ones who, spiritually speaking, have absolutely nothing to give and absolutely everything to receive...

Not the champions of faith who can rejoice even in the midst of suffering, but the ones who mourn over their own suffering because they know that for the most part they've brought it down on themselves....

Not the strong ones, but the meek ones in the sense of the gentle ones, that is, the ones....who [have the world walk over them and] somehow makes the world more human in the process.

Not the ones who are righteous, but the ones who hope they will be someday and in the meantime are well aware that the distance they still have to go is even greater than the distance they've already come....

Not the totally pure, but the "pure in heart," to use Jesus' phrase, the ones who may be as shopworn and clay-footed as the next one, but have somehow kept some inner freshness and innocence intact.

¹ Howell, James C. *The Beatitudes for Today*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pages 3-4.

² Buechner, Frederick. *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pages 19-20.

Not the ones who have necessarily found peace in its fullness, but the ones who, just for that reason, try to bring it about wherever and however they can, peace with their neighbors and God, peace with themselves.

This passage from Matthew is a part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus's core message. If you wanted the cliff notes for Jesus, this is where you would look. This sermon. These words.

And in it, Jesus turns things upside down, because they did in that day what we do today. We want God's blessing. We see God's favor in good things.

The task, Jesus tells us here, isn't to ask for God to bless where we are going, what we are doing, the faithful task is to God where God is blessing, to do work where God is already present.

Where is God present?

With the poor. The ones who are forgotten. The ones who are lost. The ones who are told they are no good. The ones whose work goes counter to the flow.

In his book on the beatitudes, James Howell recounts³, "As the first Gulf War opened in 1991, three clergy were interviewed in the McNeill-Lehrer Hour. Two declared, 'God is with us, we must win!' The third opened his Bible and read aloud about Jesus: 'Love your enemies.' 'Blessed are the peacemakers....' and was interrupted by a shout from the man next to him: 'That's not relevant now! We're at war!' His reply? 'If it's not relevant now, it's never relevant.'"

Today, we're mourning the death of Senator John McCain, a man who, because his country asked him, fought in a war. Was a prisoner of war for more than five years. Was tortured. Was neglected. Was almost killed. And whether that changed his mind or not, he stayed steadfastly opposed to torture, enhanced interrogation, throughout his life, Was the war he served in, John McCain, a beloved child of God, the harm he endured something of God, or something created out of our human brokenness? What does Jesus tell us to seek? Blessed are the peacemakers.

Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa tells a story of a prayer vigil he attended during Apartheid in South African, a vigil with the Mogopa people: ⁴

we went to them because they had been told that they were going to be forcibly removed from their ancestral lands, and the government had done everything to harass them. They'd stopped their water supply, they'd demolished schools and clinics and churches and shops.... people [praying] praying through the night, and this old man praying, "God, hear us. God, we are your people," "Thank you, God, for loving us so much,"

³ Howell, 76.

⁴ http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/oral_hist/carnegie/pdfs/desmond-tutu.pdf
<https://books.google.com/books?id=Uee6dQWxdNoC&q=mogopa#v=snippet&q=mogopa&f=false>

In the midst of all that was going on, “Thank you, God, for loving us so much.”

Could you do that?

Could I? I’m not so sure.

To be sure, this elder was not thanking God for the evils of Apartheid. He was not thanking God for what was happening to his village. He was resting, safe and secure from all alarms,⁵ in God’s love that was bigger than what was going on.

As Bishop Tutu later reflected upon this elder’s prayer, he felt he should take his shoes off, because this was surely holy ground.

Where is God? With the people of that village who were being moved or with the government who thought that being black meant that they had no rights to land or property or hope.

Blessed are the pure in heart.

Jesus tells us, where God is, that’s where the blessing is, too.

What does it mean to be blessed?

Maybe that’s where we should have started in this look at the beatitudes, because without knowing what that means, none of the rest of it makes sense.

And it’s very much not what it means when it’s preceded a pound sign on social media, #blessed.

It’s not happy. It’s not lucky.

It’s *makarios*

The adjective Μακάριοι is familiarly translated “blessed are ...” or “happy are....” Many biblical scholars call them ‘makarisms,’ a transliteration of the word Μακάριοι, while in popular parlance they are called “the beatitudes,” based on the Vulgate’s translation of the Greek Μακάριοι into the Latin *beatitudo*.⁶

Artist Jan Richardson writes:⁷

We often talk about being blessed as if it is a reward, as if good fortune comes to us as just desserts. Much of Christian culture equates blessing with prosperity, with health, with satisfaction and obvious abundance. While it’s

⁵ From the hymn “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.”

⁶ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/01/honoring-dishonored.html>

⁷ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2011/01/23/epiphany-4-litany-of-the-blessed/>

tempting to equate these gifts with the favor of God, this notion comes with a corresponding fallacy that says that those who are sick, those who are not prosperous, those whom misfortune has visited: these are not blessed.

With the beatitudes, Jesus utterly disrupts this line of thinking. Being blessed is not a reward for a job well done or for the accident of being born into fortunate circumstances. It is likewise not an accomplishment, an end goal, or a state of completion that allows us to coast along. And although the Greek **makarios** can be translated also as **happy**, being blessed does not rest solely upon an emotion: blessing does not depend on our finding or forcing ourselves into a particular mood.

Here in the beatitudes and throughout his ministry, Jesus proclaims that blessing happens in seeing the presence of Christ, in hearing him, in receiving him, in responding to him. And because Christ so often chooses places of desperate lack—those spaces where people are without comfort or health or strength or freedom, those places where they hunger for food or mercy or peace or safety—it is when we go into those places, when we seek and serve those who dwell there, that we find the presence of Christ.

That we find the presence of Christ.

And it isn't just about other people.
Other places.

It's also about you. Here.

Kate Bowler, author of a book entitled “Blessed,”⁸ offers that the:

English word “blessing” derives from the Old English *bletsian* and the Germanic *blodison*, which means to mark as holy with blood. Originally, these words spoke of altar sacrifice involving blood. The connection between blood and blessing fits what I know to be true about life.

It is sometimes bloody. It is often a blessing. It is usually both. [She says] There are some days when we feel we will drown in the exhaustion of trying to stay afloat. Days when we're teetering on the edge of the world and the weight on our shoulders just might tip us over. Days when blood and blessing are being drained from our limbs and hearts.

Blessed are, Jesus says.

Which is good news.

Jesus doesn't tell us that it is when we do these things.
That when we go to these places that we will find God's blessing.

⁸ <https://katebowler.com/blessing-world-ending/>

Jesus says, “Blessed are.”

Not someday.

Not when.

Blessed are.

And not blessed is Matthew or blessed is Martha.

Blessed are You, plural.

We’re not ever supposed to be in this together.

We rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, it says in Romans.
And we receive God’s blessing, together, too.

To Go.

To Be.

To Love.

To Witness.

These are the beatitude for the 21st century. And we can only truly understand them when we live them.

James Howell concludes his book in this way, and it is with his words that I leave us.⁹

The life portrayed by Jesus in the Beatitudes [is a gift.] And so, we wade into the water, almost as novices who never learned to swim. At first, the nonswimmer experiences the water as the enemy, as all peril. He flails, struggles mightily, feeling his body sinking, unable to battle the water successfully to stay afloat. But a loving instructor looks him in the eye and says, “trust the water. don’t fight the water. Just rest, be still. The water will hold you.” and so, gradually, the nonswimmer relaxes, and discovers to his surprise a buoyancy. And then he is no longer a nonswimmer. Trust the Spirit. Trust the speaker of the Beatitudes. And then you will be blessed.

⁹ Howell page 112.