

Melanie Rosa
Lakewood UMC

“The Beatitudes”

Matthew 5:1-12
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The Beatitudes have been referred to as the “Be Happy Attitudes” but I find them anything but. In fact, I think that they are such a shock to the senses that you want to call in the services of a professional proofreader to look for typographical errors. “Blessed are the meek”? How can that be? Not on Super Bowl Sunday! Imagine an NFL coach reading the Beatitudes to the team just before a game. Surely Jesus said “sleek” instead of meek, and “Blessed are the cheese makers” instead of “peace makers,” as Monty Python suggested. Blessed are the poor, sad, sorrowful, persecuted? There must be a mistake. When you read this stuff, it is so counter-intuitive that you figure that there must be a misprint somewhere.

You know how people clamor to have the Ten Commandments posted in public buildings? Yet they rarely ask to have the Beatitudes posted in public buildings, because these words are shocking. Can you imagine “Blessed are the merciful” or “Blessed are the persecuted” in a courtroom? Can you imagine “Blessed are the peacemakers” in the Pentagon? These teachings call us to a radical way of life that is drastically different from what we are accustomed to. The Beatitudes are statements about a stunning new reality Jesus was presenting to his disciples

This style of communication is a well-established literary genre in both Judaism and Christianity. The Psalms begin with a beatitude: “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked .” (Psalm 1:1), and another can be found at the conclusion of Psalm 2: “Happy are all who take refuge in God.” There are many other examples in both in the Old Testament and in extra biblical texts. The New Testament writers adopted this same style. Outside of The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and its parallel in Luke known as the Sermon on the Plain, such sayings are found throughout the New Testament. James 1:12 says “Blessed is one who endures trial.” Romans 14:22 says “Happy is one who is blameless” and in John’s Gospel Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” (20:29).

Jesus delivered these sayings known as the Sermon on the Mount at the peak of his popularity. Matthew tells us that crowds followed him wherever he went to see him curing the sick, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics. Everyone wanted to catch a glimpse of this miracle worker, asking: “Is he the Messiah?” These were downtrodden people, yearning for liberation from Roman rule. Jesus delivers startling and even confusing advice. His words highlight the huge gap between the ideal spiritual life and the reality in which we live Human beings have always

valued strength and power, giving glory to the self-assured, the proud, the triumphant. Jesus is turning those values upside down and inside out, and it is troubling. So how do we, the modern day disciples of Jesus, understand and practice these values in our daily lives?

First, I think we need to begin right where Jesus did, with poverty of spirit. And that means starting with the realization that we are broken and we need help. Twelve Step programs begin there too, inviting people to admit their great need for help and accept the restoration that only God can give. Poverty of spirit means admitting that we cannot do it on our own. We are helpless before our sins, failures, and needs. There is nothing weak or pathetic or shameful about being poor in spirit, rather it means that we know we are not masters of the universe and in complete control of our lives. We are dependent upon God, first and foremost. In the Christian life, this is where you begin every day, not with the understanding of yourself as a hopeless sinner, but with the realization of how much you need God's grace and help.

Secondly, the Beatitudes, are not descriptions of human feelings. When Jesus says that we are "blessed," he is not saying that this will lead to happiness. To be reviled and persecuted because you follow the Lord might turn out to be a blessing in the end, but it is not going to make you feel particularly cheerful. Being blessed by God is no guarantee of prosperity, contentment or happiness. In fact, it could be just the opposite. It can be challenging to be blessed by the Living God.

I remember attending the funeral of a woman who was a dear friend of my mother. She was a lovely lady and she had a great life--a beautiful home, successful children, a husband she adored. She was someone we always admired, and we assumed she had the ideal life. But at her funeral I learned just the opposite was the case. She had suffered incredible heartache--she was shunned from a small community where she was a schoolteacher for not living up to their expectations, she lost a child, she was divorced in a time when that carried a lot of stigma, she battled illnesses that we never knew about. And yet she considered herself richly blessed and she always lived as if she was the most fortunate person on earth. I was amazed, and I realized once again that being blessed is not related to outward circumstances. It is not about the things acquired or earned. In fact, it is not about things at all, or circumstances, but something much deeper, something spiritual. To be blessed, is to be made privileged by the action of God. To be blessed is to be called to a higher reality, a spiritual reality and that takes work. So the blessing of the Beatitudes is not really about us or how we feel about ourselves or our lives. Instead, it's all about what God can do with and within us.

Writes Eugene Boring, Professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School, “Christianity is not a scheme to reduce stress, lose weight, advance in one’s career, ~~bring happiness, or preserve one from illness. Christian faith, instead, is a way of~~ living based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will finally prevail, and that God’s future will be a time of mercy and not cruelty. So, blessed are those who live this life now, even when such a life seems foolish, for they will, in the end, be vindicated by God.” (*New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VII, p. 181*)

With this perspective in mind, we can get a clearer sense of what Jesus is talking about when he describes his disciples as “blessed.” What he is saying is that these former fishermen are blessed because they are experiencing the coming of God’s reality, and they are in the process of discovering that their lives are being reshaped by this new reality. No longer will the meaning of life be defined by their culture, or the expectations of their extended families, or the size of the fish being pulled out of the Sea of Galilee. From now on, the dominant reality in their existence will be their place in the eyes of God. They do not have to be the best, the first, or the greatest to be blessed by God. The Beatitudes honor those, who do not get lucky breaks in life. The poor, the grief stricken, the persecuted, humble, these invisible and forgotten people—they are special in the eyes of God.

In the book The Jesus I Never Knew, Phillip Yancey helped me to understand how the Beatitudes are about both current and future reality. They describe the present as well as the future. They are set in the present tense: “Blessed *are* those who mourn.” But also in the future “...for they *will be* comforted.” Blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they *will be* filled. Blessed *are* the peacemakers for they *will be* called the children of God.” They offer a promise of blessing now and something better in the future. Yancey writes “To people who are trapped in pain, in broken homes, in economic chaos, in hatred and fear and violence—to these Jesus offers a promise of a time, far longer and more substantial than this time on earth, of health and wholeness and pleasure and peace. A time of reward.” (p. 113)

And finally, the Beatitudes are a call to action. They are not affirming the weak and passive, far from it. They are a call to actively engage in the world in deep and meaningful ways. Being meek does not make you passive, although that is the interpretation of Upton Dickson. Mr. Dickson appreciated Jesus elevating the meek so much that he organized a group of meek people called DOORMATS. That stands for “Dependent Organization of Really Meek and Timid Souls — if there are no objections.” Their motto was: “The meek shall inherit the earth — if

that's okay with everybody else.” No, the Beatitudes are calls to action. You cannot be persecuted for righteousness if you are relaxing at home, you cannot make peace or work for righteousness in front of your television set. We are called to actively make this world a place where the forgotten, the poor, the sad and the suffering have equal footing with the privileged and the powerful.

Before joining a Jesuit Order, one man decided to visit the Holy Land to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. He writes, “I visited the “Chapel of the Beatitudes,” a small, eight-sided stone church that stands on a hill overlooking the sea. I remember sitting there one afternoon, carefully reading the familiar words inscribed on the chapel walls: Blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those persecuted for the sake of justice . I walked onto the balcony and surveyed the magnificent Sea of Galilee. It suddenly dawned on me: I think Jesus is serious. I turned to the sky and called out to God, “Are you trying to tell me something? Do you want me to hunger and thirst for justice? Do you want me to be a peacemaker? Do you want me to work for justice?” “All right,” I declared, “I’ll work for peace and justice for the rest of my life — but on one condition: if you give me a sign!” Immediately, two Lebanese jets swooped down at me from the sky above the Sea of Galilee. They roared over me, causing a sonic boom. Moments later, they dropped bombs nearby. Trembling, I made two decisions in that moment. I would devote the rest of my life to working for peace and justice. And I would never, ever ask God for another sign.” (“Blessed are the nonviolent.” *The Other Side*, January-February, 2006)

So understanding the Beatitudes in our time begins with the realization that we are poor in spirit and we need God’s help. These teachings remind us that being blessed does not necessarily equate with happiness or prosperity. They are about an inner reality, not outward circumstances. And while they offer us hope for the here and now, they also give us great hope for the future. And they are not idealistic sentimental sayings, they are calls to action. There are no typographical errors or misinterpretations of what Jesus was saying here. Simply life changing truths about the sort of people who are richly blessed, because they are beloved children of God.