

Blessed Are the Courageous
A Sermon on Matthew 5:1-12
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 2, 2020

Introduction

The Sermon on the Mount is the core of the gospel to many Christians, especially those who are committed to nonviolence of us. You see plaques of the Beatitudes hanging on a lot of living rooms.

I preached on the Sermon on the Mount my first seven Sundays at Edmond Trinity over 12 years ago. I wanted you to know that this was the canon within the canon for me; it still is. My understanding of God, Christ and Church is built upon it.

This is the sixth time I have preached on the Beatitudes. I hope I am starting to figure them out. Today I will try to give you my best analysis of what the Beatitudes mean and apply them to my trip to Israel and Palestine. My sermon will be a little longer today because instead of taking 15 minutes to talk about my trip, I worked it into the sermon.

First Move: The Setting for the Sermon on the Mount

After Jesus called the first four disciples, he traveled throughout Galilee. He healed every disease and sickness among the people and proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand. His fame spread throughout Syria, north of Galilee. Great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

When Jesus beholds the crowds, he climbs up a mountain. The traditional setting for the Sermon on the Mount is the Mount of Beatitudes. It is near Tabgha, just west of Capernaum, on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee. It rises about 200 meters above the Sea of Galilee. The mountains in Israel are more like the Arbuckles.

Christian churches have been built on the top of the Mount of Beatitudes since the fourth century. The church that is there now, the Church of Beatitudes, was built by the Franciscans in 1937-38.

John Dear, the Catholic peacemaker, visited the church in 1982, shortly after Israel invaded Lebanon. John had just graduated college and was backpacking his way across Israel. The church is an eight-sided building, with one of the Beatitudes

printed on each wall. As he was reading the Beatitudes, John felt that they were addressed to him. “Blessed are *you* when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you.”

In his autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, John says that he went out on the balcony behind the church, overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and made a deal with God. “Okay, God. I promise to live out your Beatitudes—to hunger and thirst for justice, to work for peace, to love my enemies, to practice the Sermon on the Mount for the rest of my life, on one condition: if you give me a sign!” He brought his fist down on the balcony railing to show his sincerity.

At that moment two Israeli fighter jets fell out of the sky and rocketed across the sea, a few yards above the water. They were setting off sonic booms and headed right for John. He thought they might fly into the balcony where he was standing. At the last second they pulled up and blasted over the church. A few minutes later, he heard faint explosions, the sound of the jets dropping their bombs in Lebanon, just 15 miles north.

John stood up trembling and looked at the sky. “Okay, God, I promise here and now to dedicate the rest of my life to living the Beatitudes. . . . I’ll never ask for a sign again.”

This is the setting for the Sermon on the Mount. The crowds from all over the Holy Land follow Jesus up the mountain. Jesus sits about where the Church of the Beatitudes is located.

Second Move: Prophetic Declarations

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes. There are nine Beatitudes in Matthew’s version of the sermon. Some scholars count the 8th and 9th Beatitudes as one.

Each Beatitude starts with the same Greek word, μακάριοι. In Greek secular usage, μακάριοι meant fortunate, lucky, privileged or favored. Macarisms in the Psalms are usually translated as happy. Psalm 1: “Happy are those . . . who take their delight in the Torah of the Lord.” Μακάριος is a poetic word. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says, “It denotes the transcendent happiness of a life beyond care, labor and death.” Homer in *The Odyssey* uses it to describe a life of godlike blessedness.

However it is translated into English, μακάριοι is passive not active. A person is fortunate or happy not because of something the person did; they are fortunate or happy because of circumstance or the action of something or someone else. In religious usage, it meant that a person was favored or blessed by the fates or by the

gods. The King James Bible translated μακάριοι as blessed. We should keep all these meanings in mind as we hear the Beatitudes: blessed, fortunate, happy.

Jesus tells nine different groups of people that they are happy or fortunate or blessed by God. The first eight Beatitudes are in the indicative not the imperative. Jesus says, blessed *are* the poor, not you *should* become poor. The Beatitudes in Greek don't even have a verb. They simply say, Blessed . . . the poor in spirit. Blessed . . . those who grieve. Blessed . . . the gentle. Blessed . . . those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Beatitudes originated as wisdom sayings. They reflected the ideals of classical Greek philosophy. Beatitudes in the Old Testament are similar; they reflect practical wisdom. By New Testament times, beatitudes had an eschatological edge. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the hungry. These people are suffering now, how can they be fortunate? They reflect the reversal of values that will take place in the kingdom. The Beatitudes are intended to be prophetic declarations. These people are happy or blessed right now.

Luke has four Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Plain, which is his counterpart to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus in the Sermon on the Plain pronounces blessings on the poor, those who weep, the hungry, and those who are persecuted. Luke's Beatitudes are likely more original, that is, they more likely reflect the actual words used by the historical Jesus. They emphasize people who are suffering now.

Matthew shifts the focus of the Beatitudes to moral exhortation. They still describe people who are suffering, but they broaden the scope of the Beatitude and lift them up as moral examples that we should follow. Matthew's version of the Beatitudes blesses the poor in spirit instead of the poor and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness instead of those who are hungry now.

The first Beatitude is, Blessed are the poor in spirit. This can have more than one meaning. The Greek word for poor means a beggar, someone who is wretchedly poor. It is never used metaphorically in Greek outside the Bible. The traditional interpretation reads it metaphorically because of the phrase, in spirit. The root meaning of the Greek word for poor is to be totally dependent on someone else. In the Hebrew Bible the poor are understood as the true people of God because they know that their lives are not in their control and that they are totally dependent upon God. Their identity and security are in God. They stand before God as beggars.

There are other possible meanings of poor in spirit. The ancient church understood spiritual poverty as humility. Poor in spirit could also be interpreted to emphasize the negative spiritual consequences of poverty. People who are so poor

that their spirits are crushed—they have given up hope. This is a rich text; we don't have to decide on just one meaning. All are possible.

The second Beatitude is, Blessed are those who mourn or grieve or lament. Early church fathers understood mourning in this Beatitude as mourning for our own sins. Matthew more likely is alluding to Isaiah 61, where the people are mourning for the fate of Jerusalem, which has been conquered. It could also mean mourning that God's kingdom has not yet come; instead people are suffering from the evils of the present age.

King James translates the third Beatitude as, Blessed are the meek. The English word *meek* carries negative connotations of being submissive. Meek is a translation of the Greek word, *προύς*. When it is used elsewhere in the New Testament, it is translated as gentle. Jesus says in Matthew 11:29: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." In Matthew 21:5, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and Matthew quotes from Zechariah. "Look, your king is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey." In Greek secular usage, *προύς* is used to refer to a horse who is broken and has learned to accept a bit in its mouth. It means tame.

The fourth Beatitude is, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness or justice. To be righteous means to be in right relationship with God. It also means to be just and fair. Favored by God are those who hunger and thirst for God's vision of justice. What motivates them is answering God's call, not pursuing their own self interest.

The fifth Beatitude is, Blessed are the merciful. Mercy is a primary attribute of God in the Hebrew Bible. Exodus 34:6 expresses a formula that is repeated throughout the Hebrew Bible: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." We imitate God by showing mercy. It includes both compassion for people in need and forgiveness for people who have wronged us. We even have compassion for our enemies.

The sixth Beatitude is, Blessed are the pure in heart. This is a paraphrase of Psalm 24, which asks, "Who shall be admitted into the sanctuary? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts." The heart was thought to be the seat of the will. Our desires come from the heart. Purity of heart means single-minded devotion to God. It also means that our actions are aligned with our ideals. The pure in heart are not hypocrites.

The seventh Beatitude is, Blessed are the peacemakers. The Greek word is *εἰρηνοποιοί*. This is the only place it appears in the New Testament. It means peace doer or peace maker. It means taking concrete steps to bring God's shalom to

interpersonal relations and to warring groups of people. Peacemaking is more than being peaceable. It is doing peace. It means reconciliation, bringing people together.

The eighth Beatitude is, Blessed are those who have been persecuted because of righteousness. This Beatitude recognizes that modeling God's righteousness will bring you into conflict with the powers that control society. The powers are already happy with the way society is structured. Traditionalist churches resist having women in leadership and accepting gays and lesbians. They will persecute anyone who tries to change it. Many congregations do not even discuss tough issues, like climate change, war and immigration. They don't want to offend the traditionalists and they are willing to submit to the powers. Taking no action means that an unjust status quo remains in place. It says that you would rather avoid conflict than strive for the Beloved Community.

The first eight Beatitudes are in the third person, Blessed are the ones who [blank]. The final Beatitude is the longest and it shifts to second person plural. It also has the only imperative in the Beatitudes. That means it is the climax of all of the Beatitudes. Jesus commands the disciples to rejoice and be glad. That is your command: Rejoice that you are persecuted. You are provoking a reaction. Your discipleship is having an effect on the status quo. Doing justice work burns people out unless they are grounded in an authentic spirituality. They need to be able to rejoice along the way.

Third Move: Spiritual Consequences

Jesus makes a prophetic declaration in the first half of each Beatitude. Blessed are the poor in spirit. We have just gone through all nine of those. In the second half of each beatitude he states a spiritual consequence. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens.

The spiritual consequences are sometimes called rewards. The NRSV translates the ninth Beatitude as, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." Reward is a translation of the Greek word, μισθός, which means wages or compensation.

I would avoid translating μισθός as reward. Psychologists today question whether reward and punishment are the best tools for motivating people to change their behavior. They may seek to get the reward or avoid the punishment, but to transform their behavior, their motivation needs to come from within. Marshall Rosenberg, the psychologist who wrote *Nonviolent Communication*, which we studied in our Wednesday night group a few years ago, says that we have gotten the idea into our heads that as a parent, a teacher or a manager, our job is to make

demands. It doesn't work. If you want your spouse or your child to do something, you can make all the demands that you want, but that still doesn't motivate them to do anything. It is more likely to motivate them to do just the opposite.

A contemporary view of God builds on this psychological insight. John Dominic Crossan expresses a theology that sees a nonviolent God as acting through consequences rather than punishment. God builds consequences into the nature of reality. When we sin, we suffer from the consequences of that sin. If we commit violence, we start an escalating cycle of violence. It is the same way with rewards. A contemporary theology sees God as acting through consequences instead of rewards.

Jesus describes the spiritual consequence of being poor in spirit: theirs is the kingdom of the heavens. If we empty ourselves of our desires, we let go of our pride, our ego, our self-righteousness and our judgmentalism. These are the things that separate us from God. Through prayer and meditation we can be free from these things. The kingdom is a natural consequence of emptying ourselves.

The first and eighth Beatitudes each has the same spiritual consequence: theirs is the kingdom of the heavens. The middle six Beatitudes describe the attributes of people in the kingdom.

Those who grieve will be comforted. God is the one who comforts us. The Greek word *παρακαλέω* means to call to the side of. God calls us to his side. We are called into the presence of God when we grieve.

John Dear in his book, *The Beatitudes of Peace*, sees this Beatitude as a call to make grief a spiritual practice. If we see every person as our sister or our brother, we will mourn for anyone who is suffering from circumstance or injustice. Grieving daily builds up our sense of compassion. It raises our awareness that we are grieving with God. We grieve for the immigrants at the border, we grieve for the prisoners on death row, we grieve for the people of Palestine. It gives us comfort when we are suffering ourselves, for we know that God is grieving for us.

The meek or the gentle will inherit the earth. This is a paraphrase of Psalm 37:11. The psalmist instructs us not to fret about the wicked, for they will soon wither like the grass. The psalmist encourages us to commit to the way of the Lord and trust in God. The Lord will restore the land to the meek and gentle. The earth and its resources belong to God. The present inequitable distribution of land will end. We can extend the meaning of this Psalm to the climate crisis. Future generations will only be able to inherit the earth if we leave a gentle footprint.

The pure of heart will see God. This Beatitude becomes the essence of Christian mysticism. The purified soul has purged itself of thoughts and desires and

can see God clearly, as in a mirror. The mystics are filled with joy when they practice centering prayer. Teresa of Avila speaks of her beatific vision of union with God. It is not an image of God but a feeling of being overwhelmed and enveloped by God's love. The great light of love fills her soul.

Peacemakers will be called sons of God. This anticipates the antithesis in Matthew 5:44-45: "Love your enemies and pray to God on behalf of the ones who are persecuting you. In this way you may become sons of your father in the heavens, since he raises his sun on the evil and the good and rains on the righteous and the unrighteous." The Gospels refer to Jesus as the son of God. Christian tradition has always wanted to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus as the son of God. Matthew says that peacemakers are Christ-like. They, too, are sons of God. If our identity is as sons and daughters of God, we are no longer divided into nations or religious sects or political parties. We see every person as a child of God.

The ninth Beatitude is, Blessed are you when they mock you and persecute you and tell lies about you. Rejoice and be glad that your compensation in the heavens is great. A promise is not granted for all persecutions, but only for persecutions that come from following Jesus. We should not seek suffering, but suffering will come if we embrace the values of the kingdom. It will bring us into conflict with the status quo. There is joy in this suffering because we know that we are helping to build the kingdom by provoking a response.

Fourth Move: Moral Courage in Palestine

The ninth and climactic Beatitude reminds me of a speech that Robert Kennedy gave in Capetown, South Africa in 1966. He said,

Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. *Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence* [emphasis added]. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality of those who seek to change a world which yields most painfully to change.

This sounds hard to believe. Moral courage is rarer than bravery in battle? The idea may be that soldiers bond with their fellow soldiers. They would lay down their life for their friends. Moral courage requires that we risk offending our peers. Instead of craving the approval of our peers, we look to Jesus as our polar star. It may be painful. Your peers may say evil things about you. You may feel isolated. You will be blessed if you are bold and courageous. Jesus should be your moral compass, not your colleagues.

We shouldn't think of pacifists as cowards, too afraid to use violence to defend themselves. Gandhi believed that his followers needed to have the same courage that soldiers had on a battlefield. He believed that it took more courage to rely on nonviolence instead of violence. People who are committed to nonviolence have to be willing to take the suffering upon themselves. Throughout Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles, Christians are exhorted to be bold and courageous.

I just returned from a ten-day trip to Israel and Palestine. It was an immersion class for seminary, 12 M.Div. students and 12 D.Min. students. We spent four days visiting the holy sites and six days on an alternative tour of the West Bank or Palestine.

You get a different impression of the West Bank by visiting it in person instead of reading about it in the news media. You get a feel for how the Palestinians live on a daily basis.

Israel controls every aspect of life in the West Bank. There is no such thing as freedom of travel for Palestinians. They have to carry an identity card at all times. If you don't have your card, you are arrested and sent to a detention center. Palestinians have to pass through checkpoints whenever they leave a Palestinian city. According to B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights group, there were 99 checkpoints in the West Bank in 2013. The checkpoints are not just for security; they are intended to separate the Palestinians from Israeli settlements in the West Bank. This makes it difficult to work in another city or to ship goods and materials to another city. You never know how long it will take you to get through the checkpoints, maybe five minutes, 30 minutes, maybe two or three hours. Ambulances have to wait at the checkpoints along with everyone else. According to the Palestinian health ministry, between 2000 and 2006, 68 women gave birth at checkpoints; 35 of these miscarried and five died in childbirth.

In addition to the checkpoints, Israel has built a wall all along the perimeter of the West Bank, 400 miles long. It is built 10-11 miles inside the border of the West Bank, so about 9% of the West Bank is fenced out.

The wall was built after the Second Intifada, which lasted from 2000 to 2003. One thousand Israelis and 3,000 Palestinians were killed in the Intifada. Israel said that it built the wall to keep out suicide bombers. Opponents of the wall say that it creates a new border between Israel and the West Bank that gives Israel even more of the West Bank.

Israel has built 121 settlements in the West Bank, with a population of 400,000 Jewish settlers. Israel also has allowed 300,000 settlers to build homes in

neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. Another 20,000 Israelis live in settlements in the Golan Heights. About 2.5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank.

These settlements are built in rings around Palestinian cities to keep them from expanding. They trap Palestinians in their cities. Palestinians call their cities open-air prisons. Israeli has built good roads for the settlers and Palestinians are not allowed to travel on them. These roads also cut up the West Bank and take away even more territory from the Palestinians.

The settlements are illegal under international law: you can't acquire land by war and colonize it. The settlements are being built on lands that Israel conquered by war in 1967. Every peace plan that has been floated in the last 50 years uses the 1967 borders as a basis for a two-state solution. Now Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has announced plans to annex 30% of the West Bank in which the settlements have been built.

We talked to Bob Lange, who is the town administrator of Efrat, which is the capital of Gush Etzion, a cluster of settlements south of Bethlehem. Lange is an Orthodox Jew. He emigrated from New York in the 1970s. He calls the West Bank Judea and Samaria. He believes that Israel has a Biblical claim to all the lands in Israel and Palestine. The majority of settlers share his beliefs; they are Orthodox or ultra Orthodox. His hope is for a one-state solution, that Israel will annex all of the West Bank and that Jews will have sovereign rule over all of Israel and Palestine.

Israel controls all the resources in the West Bank, including water and airways. Eighty percent of the water in the West Bank is directed to Israeli citizens and settlers; only 20% of the water is allocated to the West Bank. A two-state solution will be difficult for Israel because it would be separated itself from the main water supply.

Air waves are another resource. We talked to a Palestinian businessman who is in the tech industry. He said that mobile phones work by air waves. His company asked Israel for six lanes of airwaves. After a year, Israel responded that they could only have 2½ airwaves and had to share the ½ with a settler group. He tried for 12 years to get 3G, and was only permitted to have it in 2018. 3G is now an exiting technology. Reducing access to a resource has a chain effect. Palestinian youth will not be able to get into the cutting edge of application development.

Palestinian children and youth protest the occupation by throwing stones at the wall. That is a criminal offense. 700 to 1000 children are arrested every year; 95% are arrested for throwing stones. They are held in military jails and tried in military prisons. Israeli soldiers will come at 2 or 3 in the morning and break into the house, disturbing the whole neighborhood. The children can be held for 75 days for

questioning without charges being filed. Then they can be detained for 18 months without sentencing. They can be sentenced to 10 years for throwing stones at a static object, 20 years for a moving vehicle.

What can Americans do about this? We are partly responsible by providing Israel with \$3 billion per year in military aid and by vetoing any resolutions at the United Nations that condemn Israel for human rights violations.

Global Ministries works with a mission partner, No Way to Treat a Child, to end the practice of putting Palestinian children in military jails. Disciples of Christ passed a resolution to support this ministry at General Assembly in 2017.

Our tour sponsors encouraged us to participate in the BDS movement: Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions. As private citizens, we are limited primarily to divesting, which means encouraging organizations that we are involved in to divest from Israeli companies that support the settlements. It is based on the international movement in the 1980s that was helpful in ending apartheid in South Africa. We talked about getting the Pension Fund and Phillips Seminary to divest. So far, the United Church of Christ is the only mainline denomination that has endorsed BDS.

I am reluctant to support BDS. The Central Conference of American Rabbis, which is the leading group of Reformed rabbis in America, calls BDS an assault against Israel. Bari Weiss, who is an editor for the opinion page for the *New York Times*, says in her book, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, that BDS is opposed to the existence of a Jewish state.

I want to be pro-Jewish and pro-Palestinian. I would rather work with our rabbis, Vered Harris and Abby Jacobson, to see what we can agree on. The Central Conference of American Rabbis has a long history of opposition to Israeli settlements. Can we work together to end settlements and to support the civil rights of Palestinians, their freedom to travel, control of their own resources, allowing freedom of protest, abolishing the practice of putting children in military jails?

I have meetings in the next week with Vered and Abby to talk about this. I also plan to talk with Imam Imad Enchassi, who is a Palestinian. He is on the faculty at Oklahoma City University and Phillips Seminary.

We have progressed so far in interfaith work since the 1960s. I hope we can continue the work and agree on a joint statement about Palestinian issues. Get our congregations to speak up about these violations of human rights.

Conclusion

We see the Beatitudes running all through the issues with Palestine. We grieve for the 70 years of conflict there, for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who

have lost their homes and been forced to flee and who are forced to live today in open-air prisons. We hope that God will comfort them. We want to be merciful to Israelis and Palestinians. People in good faith on all sides have tried to be peacemakers, and nothing seems to work.

We can rejoice and be glad if we are persecuted because we reject calls from colleagues on the right to be anti-Palestinian and from colleagues on the left to be anti-Israel. We can work with our interfaith partners to be pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel. Then we will be blessed for showing moral courage and for helping to bring peace to the Holy Land.

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