

Living the Beatitudes
A Sermon on Matthew 5:1-12
Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany
January 29, 2017

Introduction

It is time to get back to basics. The Sermon on the Mount is the gospel within the gospel. It is a gift from God. Christians should treasure it the way that Jews treasure the Torah, which is the Jewish name for the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The Torah helps people to stay in covenant relationship with God. It sets forth their understanding of God's expectations for them. The Sermon on the Mount shows people what life is like when they follow Jesus. It does not lay down a set of rules. Instead it gives us a series of examples that show us what people who are filled with the love of God are like. It is a report about people who have crossed over to the other side. They no longer reflect cultural norms. Instead, they embody the values of the kingdom.

We can read these texts from a political, ethical and spiritual perspective. Today I want to focus on the spiritual aspect of the Beatitudes. That will nourish us and give us the strength to do the ethical work.

First Move: Prophetic Declarations

Last week when Mary told us about the call of the disciples, we saw that God's reign is disruptive and transformative. Jesus calls us to drop everything and follow him. Jesus begins his public ministry in the Gospel of Matthew by preaching the Sermon on the Mount. It sketches an alternative world, marked not by political and economic oppression but by restructured relationships and redistributed resources.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes. There are nine beatitudes in Matthew's version of the sermon. They each start 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." 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.

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 now, 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. 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, *πρόυς*. 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, *πρόυς* 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 obey 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.

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.

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 is obedience to God's will. Evil desires also come out of the heart. Jesus says in Matthew 15:19: "For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander." If our hearts are pure, we push violence and injustice out of our hearts and make room for God.

Blessed are the peacemakers. This is a thoroughly Jewish thought. It means taking concrete steps to bring God's shalom to interpersonal relations and to warring groups of people. Peacemaking is active. It is more than being peaceable. It literally means doing peace. Doing peace means reconciliation, bringing people together. As I suggested in my last sermon, *Dear White Christians*, reconciliation may be premature unless you have done the truth work first. We have to know and recognize the full extent of the harm that has been suffered, and the wrongdoer has to

acknowledge that, until we can ask the victim of the harm to reconcile with the wrongdoer.

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 homosexuality, 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. 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.

Second 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." King James translates the second half of the verse as "for great is your reward 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 motivate 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 two 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 to do something, you can make all the demands that you want but that still doesn't motivate your spouse 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. Last fall in our Wednesday night study of *Violence in the Bible*, John Dominic Crossan expressed 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.

Those who grieve will be comforted. John Dear in his new 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. 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. The oldest parts of the Hebrew Bible refer to all of Israel as sons of God. That theology evolved into the king of Israel as the son of God. 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.

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. We all are looking for meaning. That is the existential crisis of middle-class Americans, especially white, middle-class Americans. The kingdom fills our lives with meaning. It shows us what God is like. It connects us with something that is bigger than ourselves.

John Dear tells the story of being invited to speak in 2004 at the convocation of an evangelical Christian college. For 150 years, the convocation featured a sermon by a leading fundamentalist preacher. The college gymnasium was filled with thousands of students. John preached on the Beatitudes, with the Beatitudes displayed on a screen behind him on the stage. He began by noting that Jesus blessed the peacemakers, not the warmakers. He wondered if peacemakers could support the war in Iraq. Five hundred students walked out and thousands more chanted, "Bush, Bush, Bush." Dear visited classes the rest of the day and said that he never faced such hostility from Christians. He attended an evening reception that normally attracted 25 students. This time 800 students showed up. It was an informal time for questions and answers. Students lined up to meet him and one by one, they shouted, screamed and denounced him.

Faculty members later told John Dear that they were thrilled with the episode. They had never seen the students so engaged. The moment that stood out for Dear was as he left the gymnasium in the morning. Two sophomore girls came running up to him and big smiles, shouting, "You did it! You did it! Everyone hates you. Rejoice and be glad." John said that he still rejoices about the experience.

Conclusion

If we take the Beatitudes seriously, we will make them a way of life. Living the Beatitudes will develop a spirituality of non violence within us.

It is not easy. It is counter cultural. We will be tempted to take the easy way out and submit to the values of the culture.

It helps if we are in a community of disciples who are traveling together on the way. John Dear likes to say that our churches should become training camps for non violence.

We are a Pink Chalice congregation because we are open and affirming. We are a Green Chalice congregation because we try to conserve resources and live gently on the earth. I hope we can become a White Chalice congregation and be recognized as a peace church, filled with gentle people who mourn for the suffering of the world and hunger and thirst for righteousness. Then we can rejoice and be glad, for we will be drawing near to the kingdom.

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