

Blessed

As we enter into the liturgical season of Lent, I am continuing to follow the schedule of study and preaching laid out by Brian McLaren in his book, We Make the Road by Walking. For this season, Rev. McLaren has suggested an immersion into the Sermon on the Mount, which I find very appropriate indeed. In chapters 5 – 7 of the Gospel According to Matthew, we find the Evangelist's compilation of the key teachings of Jesus. Whether this "sermon" was ever preached in one sitting or not, scholars believe that it captures the most memorable and important of Jesus' public teachings.

The problem is that over the centuries theologians, preachers, and laity alike have been unable to agree on whether or not these teachings are actually to be applied to our lives or if they are an ideal set up by Jesus that normal human beings can never live up to. This gives us an "out," so to speak from actually living life in the Jesus Way. As G.K. Chesterton famously wrote, "The problem with Christianity is not that it has been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried." Bringing this concept home specifically to the portion of the Sermon which I just read, commonly known as the Beatitudes, the "Blesseds," Brian McLaren sets up the dichotomy between what Jesus said and how our world behaves, which I adapted this morning into our litany of extinguishing candles.

Our first task in understanding what Jesus meant by all these "blesseds" is to unlearn the traditional English translation of verses 3 through 11 in Matthew 5. In the old King James Version and the more modern translations which draw from it, the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard widely used here at Good Shepherd, the New International Version and others, the repetitive word is blessed: "Blessed are the poor in spirit... blessed are those who mourn... blessed are the meek..." and so on. We actually find a more accurate translation in the "simplified" versions popular in the 60s and 70s, "Good News for Modern Man" and the Living Bible, as well as in the highly poetic translation made by Catholic scholars, the Jerusalem Bible: "Happy are the poor in spirit... Happy are those who mourn... Happy are the meek..." The Greek word used by Matthew to record Jesus' teaching is μακαριος and the late Raymond Brown wrote that μακαριος "recognize(s) an existing state of happiness..."

What we must hear as we read the Beatitudes then, is not a promise to the groups of people named that they will be happy in the future but that these are the people who have already found the secret to a happy life. In his fine book, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Kenneth E. Bailey gives a concrete example of how the Beatitudes are structured: "...we could say, 'Blessed is the happy daughter of Mr. Jones because she will inherit the Jones's farm.' The woman in question is *already* the happy daughter of Mr. Jones. She is not working to earn the farm. Everyone knows that a key element in her happy and secure life is that she and the community around her know that the farm will one day be hers." Jesus called the ones he pointed to "happy" because they were secure in the knowledge that they walked in the way of God. This is what it means in the Beatitudes to be blessed. Friedrich Hauck wrote that "The special feature of... μακαριος... in the NT is that it refers overwhelmingly to the distinctive religious joy which accrues to man from his share in the salvation of the kingdom of God."

Now that we understand that Jesus is talking about present happiness let us look more closely at those whom he says are so blessed. Again, we must do a little digging to interpret words that have become obscure after being translated from Aramaic to Greek to English and by being

taken from the context of first century Palestinian Judaism to twenty-first century America. What, for example, does Jesus mean by “the poor in spirit”? In the parallel to this verse in the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor.” Is there a difference? To answer these questions, both Kenneth Bailey and my former professor Dr. Glenn Stassen point to Jesus’ connections to the words of Isaiah, the prophet from whom he often quoted. In Isaiah 66:2, God speaks of those who are in God’s will: “But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.” The word translated as “humble” in the NRSV, *anawim*, was previously translated in the King James as “poor.” It refers to those who may or may not be poor in the things of this world but who recognize their powerlessness before God and their dependence on God’s grace. They are happy because for them the Kingdom of God is already at work – they acknowledge that God alone is king, not any human and certainly not themselves. To be able to remember always that God is in charge brings a peace of mind that certainly equates to any definition of happiness.

“Happy are those who mourn...” Now that just sounds like an outright contradiction to us but again, we must consider a deeper meaning than we usually use. Clarence Jordan was a great New Testament scholar who wrote The Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament and who started the communitarian Koinonia Farm which later gave rise to Habitat for Humanity. He wrote of this seeming contradiction, “A mourner is not necessarily one who weeps. He is one who expresses a deep concern. If the one about whom he is concerned dies, he might express his grief by crying; he might also do it by praying, or in some other way. Tears aren’t essential to mourning, but deep concern is.” Those who mourn are the ones who are deeply concerned for others. They mourn when they see injustice. They mourn over evil in the world and in their own lives. Like the poor in spirit, they look at the world and see the need for God, for humankind to follow God’s will and for Creation to be redeemed. But they are happy because they also know that God’s kingdom *has* been inaugurated, that the Beloved Community *is* gathering. As Martin Luther King said, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Happy are the ones who are concerned for others and for the state of their own souls for they are and will be comforted.

“Happy are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Jesus here is quoting from Psalm 37 which specifically concerns the Promised Land of Israel. “...those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land... the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity... The righteous shall inherit the land, and live in it forever.” It is a direct admonishment from Jesus to the spiritually proud and the violent who either expected to force the Romans from the land or to control them and stay in power as they had done under the Greeks and the Persians before them. The word translated as “meek” in the Psalms is the same Hebrew as used in Isaiah that we have previously discussed as meaning “poor in spirit” and the meaning here is much the same. The ones who will inherit the land of Israel are those who rely on God, not on their own power, on horses and chariots and armaments. Again, Clarence Jordan, who by the way was an alumnus of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has an important word of interpretation: “It is thought that a meek person is something of a doormat upon which everyone wipes his feet, a timid soul who lives in mortal fear of offending his fellow creatures. But nothing could be more foreign to the Biblical use of the word. It is used in particular to describe two persons: Moses and Jesus. One of them defied the might of Egypt and the other couldn’t be cowed by a powerful Roman official... Both of them seemed absolutely fearless in the face of men, and completely

surrendered to the will of God.” In Classic Greek usage, the word used in Matthew for meek refers to those who are able to keep the “Golden Mean” between recklessness and cowardice – they become angry, as Kenneth Bailey describes, “on the right grounds against the right person in the right manner at the right moment and for the right length of time.” Happy are the ones whose wills are surrendered to God and who act rightly towards others – they are and will be secure in their place on Earth.

The fourth and fifth beatitudes are more easily accessible to us. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” It is important to remember that Jesus did not say, “Happy are the righteous.” The journey to righteousness is a continual one in this life. We rise every morning to claim our identity as those who have been baptized, those who have been forgiven. And every day we do our best to walk humbly with God, seeing Jesus more clearly, loving him more dearly and following him more nearly. Every day, we rely on the mercy of God to be forgiven anew for all the ways in which we succumb to our brokenness and the brokenness around us that calls so strongly and sweetly that we shift our gaze from our need for Christ to selfish desire. But we know that when we pursue God’s righteousness as if we were starving for it, as if our throats were dry and our lips were cracked from want of it, then we will indeed stay in the will of God and the One who is truly righteous will forgive our every trespass. And as we experience the mercy of God, so shall we become more merciful ourselves and so shall we learn to appreciate God’s mercy more and more. It is a feedback loop, the relationship between God’s mercy and ours but so is the reverse. Lack of mercy redounds upon itself, grudge upon grudge, hatred upon hatred, as we see in Israel/Palestine today, in the civil war in Syria, in the drug gang/cartel wars on our southern border, or even in gang activity and shootings in most cities today. Happy are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Happy are the merciful.

Psalm 24 asks and answers an important question: “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts...” Jesus undoubtedly had this Psalm in mind in his teaching, “happy are the pure in heart” — again, a fairly straightforward concept. I have always loved the teaching from the great Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard who wrote, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” For the pure in heart there is no duplicity, no hidden agenda. Their hearts and minds are pointed in one direction only. In serving God they see all around them the evidence of God’s presence. Truly they are happy, as are the peacemakers. The happiness of peacemakers is a truth that we claim at Good Shepherd every week as we end our worship in singing “Shalom.” We know that as we spread God’s peace in our lives and the world around us, we are truly living as children of God. Happy are the pure in heart. Happy are the peacemakers.

Finally, we come to the two beatitudes with which we have very little personal experience. Few of us have been truly persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Oh, we may have been reviled a bit and had false things said against us. Some may have lost jobs or had doors closed against them for standing up for what their hearts told them was God’s way. But none of us, as far as I know, has been in danger of death or even bodily injury for keeping faith with Jesus. His words are a good reminder to us, however, that those who’ve not yet taken him as Lord of their lives will often fail to understand us at best and hate us at worst for what we proclaim. As our brother

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Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...”

There have been a number of attempts to re-express the Beatitudes in ways that seem more relevant to our age. I think especially of Simon and Garfunkel’s song, “Blessed,” which contains the line “Blessed are the sat upon, spat upon, ratted on...” Paul Simon was not far, I think, from the Kingdom of God when he wrote those words. A current heroine to many in the Church is Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor in Denver. While I don’t always agree with her, I find her “modern Beatitudes” touching and true:

“Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren’t sure, who can still be surprised.

Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information.

Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction.

Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.

Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried.

Blessed are they who don’t have the luxury of taking things for granted anymore.

Blessed are they who can’t fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else.

Blessed are those who “still aren’t over it yet.”

Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables.

The laundry guys at the hospital. The night-shift street sweepers.

Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the closeted.

Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented.

Blessed are the teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms. Blessed are the meek.

You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard, for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them.

Blessed are those without documentation. Blessed are the ones without lobbyists.

Blessed are foster kids and special-ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved.

Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people.

Blessed are the burned-out social workers and the overworked teachers and the pro bono case takers.

Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak. Blessed are they who hear that they are forgiven.

Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn’t deserve it.

Blessed are the merciful, for they totally get it.”

My sisters and my brothers, we are blessed. Here on the table before us are the symbols of our blessing, a blessing that those who do not know Jesus cannot understand. Here is the bread of affliction, which is become life for us, for as we live our deep concern for the world around us, we share in the abundant life of Jesus, who gave himself for us. Here is the cup of sacrifice,

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which is for us the cup of joy. Here are the symbols of our blessing. Let all who hunger, gather gladly. Thanks be to God. Amen.