Beatitudes

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Matthew 5:1-12

5:1. When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

5:2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5:5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

5:8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

5:10 "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. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

I have an image in my mind that I would like to share with you. I don’t say this lightly, but I think the image comes from God, although it’s going to be imperfectly reflected in my words.

Here is the image. It’s of people walking in darkness. But each person radiates a dome of light. Some of these domes of light are separate, so that their radius is relatively small. But in other places, people are together, so their light reveals a lot more.

Sometimes the Kingdom of God is called “The upside down kingdom.” It’s the title of Donald Kraybill’s book. The Kingdom of God is the place where down is up, slaves are free, enemies are lovable, piety is something God dislikes, outsiders are on the inside.

And I love the paradox of these statements. In my mind, it points to almost an alternate reality, a kind of science fiction other world where things are just right.

But as I have reflected on these statements of blessing by Jesus, I want to suggest a different take, and it’s this: as we live out the values of the beatitudes, we are not creating an alternate reality, but discovering reality, the “really real.”

Let me start in the middle of these blessings to explain what I mean: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

If we are merciful, we are shedding our mercy around: a small dome of light in which we don’t take offence at others, we forgive other’s wrongdoings against us, we don’t try to extract vengeance against our enemies. Since we are inside, in that light, we ourselves live in the dome of mercy. We are freed from needing to exert our emotional labor on resenting our parents, getting back on our brothers and sisters, brewing up schemes to screw over our spouse or neighbor or co-worker. As we grow in this grace, we may even become known as people who are willing to give others a break, and others may become willing to give us a break. Jesus says to pray, “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” Thinking in these terms, it is not so much, “forgive us our sins *because* we forgive the sins of others” as “let us live in the realm where mercy reigns: we forgive others, others forgive us, you forgive us all.” Don’t you want to live in that kind of light, rather than always trying to even the score? I believe this is what we are built for.

Let’s spend some time on the other beatitudes.

Jesus says, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. This seems almost like common sense. We become better at things we practice. Fifteen years of singing Sacred Harp music has made me a better Sacred Harp singer. Years of study and job practice have made us better in our jobs. Hungering and thirsty for righteousness – that is, wanting to be good so bad we can taste it – drives us to seek to do what is good. We won’t get it perfect of course, any more than I will sing a song perfectly, or write the perfect computer program, but we will have the satisfaction of getting better at being better. That’s one empirical fact I can attest to: practicing righteousness might not make perfect, but it makes better.

Related to this is Jesus’s blessing, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” This is a deep saying, and beyond my ability to expound this morning, but the same thing is roughly true here. Sören Kierkegaard said that “purity of heart is to will one thing.” As we grow better at willing the one true thing – God’s own self – God’s own self will be revealed to us. To be honest, I think we Anabaptists are pretty weak on this, and we could learn from our sisters and brothers in other traditions to concentrate our hearts and our wills. Later, we are going to partake of the Lord’s supper, one of God’s gifts to us to help concentrate on remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus, the communion we have with God and others, and the hope of an eternal life spent in God’s presence. Perhaps you might spend a little extra effort at this communion table expecting to see God.

Peacemakers are blessed, says, Jesus, for they will called the children of God. As we become the people who seek to *create peace*, to *make* it, peace will be made. Not invariably, or perfectly, but inevitably, the light of our peacemaking will shine, and the darkness will not overcome it. As we and others realize that the heart of peacemaking is reconciliation, and that reconciliation is at the heart of what God is doing in the world, we just may find ourselves being called the children of our heavenly Father. I hope we will also sense that is exactly right, that our calling as children of God is to seeking the healing and reconciliation of the world with God and with itself.

Jesus also says, “blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” What could be truer than to say that those who do not mourn do not need comfort? It is only when we feel the sadness of the world, of a lost friend, or mother, or desire, or dream that we *can* be comforted. If we harden our hearts against loss, and refuse to feel the hurt, how can we receive comfort? But if we shine out the dark light of our own mourning, it shows us in a place where we can be comforted. And, in sharing our mourning, we can be seen in our need, and our brothers and sisters can have the very real pleasure (and it is a pleasure, even if it is a sad one) of sitting with us in our grief. In sharing our mourning, too, with God, we become aware of the ways that God is at work to heal us and the world.

When Bess and I had been married for two years, we went to Spain to be self-supporting missionaries. We went expecting to be away for two years at least. We barely lasted a year. We couldn’t cut it as self-supporting missionaries, and we came home very sad, and it dogged us for years. I almost lost my faith over it. I think we were honestly mourning our failure to do this thing we thought God was calling us to do. That was thirty-five years ago. As Bess and I were traveling the other day, I turned to her and said, “Hey, Bess. Guess what I realized. I work. We started a church in our home. It’s been going on for some ten years now. My work allows us the freedom to do this thing. God has allowed us to be self-supporting missionaries in Kalamazoo.”

In all of these beatitudes, we act: we show mercy, we make peace, we mourn, we hunger and thirst, we strive for purity.

How good are we at it, at these admittedly “spiritual” things? Not so good. How proud are we of our achievements? Well, I think we could say a certain meekness is in order.

But God has blessings for even those who are poor in spirit, and recognize that their efforts are not much to be proud of. The kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. For it is only in understanding our own poverty of spirit that we recognize our need of a different way of living. For the truth is, we all live in a world which is often contrary to the kingdom of heaven, and the “real reality” of this other kingdom is hard to perceive. Perhaps the image here is not so much of us shining a light, but of getting out of the way of the light. Our efforts often block our way to the kingdom of heaven; if our poverty is to tear down all those things we own which get in the way, the light can show us the way to the kingdom. When Jesus says, “the meek shall inherit the earth,” he promises to us that even people like us can receive his kingdom.

This week, I came across an app that says it will make you happy. It only costs $9.99 a month (or $100 a year), and it will connect you up with a lot of other folks who are also trying to be happy. Doesn’t that sound good? $100 a year is not so much to pay to be happy, is it?

But Jesus reminds us that the poor and the meek, even those who don’t have a smartphone and $9.99 a month to spend can be blessed.

I have to finish on a bit of a somber note, but at least it’s the same somber note that Jesus does. Jesus reminds us that this blessedness of which he talks can take a dark turn. In fact, the world isn’t always kind to those who seek peace and mercy and poverty of spirit. We seek the “really real,” but most people live in the apparently real, and sometimes (not always) they get upset and even violent against those who try a different way. Jesus could point to the Jews’ history with the prophets who were often persecuted. The early church could point to people like Stephen the martyr. We could point to the early Anabaptist martyrs or Martin Luther King. Above all, we look to Jesus, the author of these beatitudes, murdered for our sake. Sometimes, people don’t like it when we shine lights where they don’t want lights to be shone.

But Jesus reminds us that this doesn’t negate the kingdom of heaven, the “really real.” His path leads to the kingdom of heaven whether or not we criticized or punished or even killed for following it. Just as Jesus himself was raised from the dead, so too the kingdom of heaven last forever and expands forever. In fact, our very persecution might give us some joy as we recognize that good people have been being persecuted for doing the right things for a long time, and it’s evidence that we’re doing the right thing. Paul, mysteriously, said *he* wanted to complete the sufferings Christ felt for his church, and I think it is clearly true that the church still has some sufferings to do.

We are called to live in the light. May our lives be shining examples of mercy, peacemaking, hungering for righteousness and purity of heart, so that even in our mourning, even in our poverty, even in our meekness, we enter the kingdom of heaven where God awaits, ready to behold.