

Sermon: Beatitude Trouble

Scripture: Matthew 5

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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So this is where Jesus begins his preaching career, this is where he meets the mass public, with what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Mount begins with what might be one of the most famous listings of all time, the Beatitudes. It took - even him - 40 days of fasting in the wilderness to get to these words. 40 long days of prayer, of turning to God and to nothing else, with no food to comfort, no others to distract, no busy-ness to fill the time, no purpose to make him feel of value, but just silent wilderness and turning to the silent God.

Then he came forth - dirty, hungry, tired - to speak about... happiness, of all things. His first words "blessed are", or as some translations say "happy are". "Blessed are", he said a series of head spinners that were likely to make his first century listeners no less than 21st century listeners say "huh?" "Blessed are the poor in spirit," not blessed are the spiritual giants or the devotedly faithful and the theologically clear or even the morally upright but blessed are the *poor in spirit*. Have you ever felt poor in spirit? It doesn't feel like a blessed state, does it? But Jesus calls it blessed because the poor in spirit have a better assessment of their own impoverishment and their own need for God. The pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson has a translation of the Bible called The Message where he uses more contemporary language and his translation of the beatitudes are powerful and clear. In this first beatitude he translates it this way: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope, with less of you there is more of God and his rule." In other words, happy are those who simply know their need of God.

We place such a premium as a culture on independence and self-sufficiency and being self-made people and so much of our technological advances foster greater efficiency but deeper isolation which breeds a sense that we are on our own, that we can handle it ourselves and we can lose sight of our true dependence and we seek less and less greater purpose beyond our own fulfillment. Then as a people we wonder why we are so anxious and so sad. Happy are those who are poor in spirit and know their need of God for theirs is the Kingdom of God.

Jesus then says blessed are those who mourn. Sounds like an oxymoron, happy are those who are sad? What? But then Jesus explains why they are blessed he says it's simply because they will be comforted. In my house we are watching this remarkable documentary on Netflix right now called "Cheer" and it is about a cheer team at a community college in Texas, sounds random, I know, but it is really good. The last episode we watched ended with a poignant moment between the coach and one of the team members. She's this very tough girl who had a difficult upbringing, fought a lot with others in her high school years, even landing in jail for a time, and yet had come to this college to be on this national champion cheer team, and is working to turn her life around. Along with her incredible athleticism comes this steely exterior and some social isolation from the others, which she says has always been the case for her. So she's sitting on a bench between practice sessions and the viewer is aware that her deadpan face is covering upset about some posts that a friend of a girl she had beaten up many years ago was posting which was dredging up all the old struggle and the old trauma. The episode ends with the Cheer coach, who is this remarkably intense and beloved woman, walking over to the girl and saying "what's going on? You need to talk?" The girl says "no" and the coach just stands with her head cocked waiting until girls eyes well up with tears and as the camera pulls away the music begins, the coach kneels down, puts

her hands on the girl's knee as she begins to cry and share her struggle. Sad are those who keep their sorrows and vulnerabilities locked away but blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

And with these Jesus has just begun. It is said that Gandhi read the Sermon on the Mount nearly everyday for 40 years, saying that they contained as he understood them the whole of Christianity and the heart of Jesus' teachings. "Blessed are the meek," Jesus says next, "for they will inherit the earth." Again, almost a 180 degree flip from what we expect. As human beings in general we tend to pride ourselves not on our meekness but our dominion, not on being subject to others but dominating others and that, we believe, is how we inherit the earth.

There's a book that I've been trying to get through for a while now cause it's hard reading called "Dominion: The Power of Man, The Suffering of Animals, and The Call to Mercy". It's written by Matthew Scully who is a conservative columnist who was the speech writer for George W. Bush and other Republicans and he also is a devoted vegan, because he cannot abide by the suffering we humans inflict upon animals through such abhorrent practices as factory farming and big game sport hunting. He asks the reader, with detailed and at times gruesome accounting of the animal industry that we participate in daily, whether we can possibly claim and foster human dignity in a society that treats other sentient beings as production units. Can we be happy and consider ourselves blessed when we subject the meek animal world to the brutalities and ruthlessness of factory farming. Are we humane when our own desires, appetites, satisfactions require a violence to animals that we would never come close to accepting for our own dogs and cats while the animals we kill for food are no less sentient, no less intelligent. Blessed are the merciful, Jesus says, who can no longer turn a blind eye to cruelty against the meek, for they will be shown mercy... to say nothing of the animal

industry's toll on the environment, which is enormous! Blessed are our meek and suffering animal neighbors for they will inherit the earth when we make it un-live-able for ourselves.

Blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus says, ironically as he disturbs the peace by speaking the beatitudes in the first place. The Beatitudes and the entire Sermon on the Mount are not easy teachings, they shouldn't necessarily go down easy. An interviewer asked the famous Christian apologist, CS Lewis, why he said once that he doesn't care for Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and CS Lewis said "well, I'm not sure anyone who really listens "cares for" the Sermon on The Mount. I mean, who can like being knocked flat on his face by a sledgehammer." (from *God in the Docks*). That's CS Lewis' account of the effect of the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus speaks about peace he uses the word shalom which is much more challenging and is not merely the absence of conflict but shalom is about a wholeness and well-being that is vital and vigorous in all parts of communal life. So for a peaceMAKER to get from where we are now to a state of shalom will inevitably involve some overturned tables and upended relationships and potentially a sledgehammer to the status quo. Peacemakers, who Jesus calls the children of God, are those who are actually unwilling to make peace with the way things are for the sake of the way they know things should be... but that unwillingness is never expressed through violence towards others but only, as Gandhi refers to it, only through the love force. Happy are those who do the work of making peace, even when it leads through the valley of struggle and conflict, they are children of the living and merciful God.

And we know that God is merciful because this is how Jesus teaches of God and reveals God to us as being merciful. So of course he would say also happy are those, blessed are those who are merciful for they will receive mercy. Or as Eugene Peterson

translates it quite simply – “You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being careful you find yourself cared for.” The opposite of mercy would be indifference. An obstacle to mercy might be the pursuit of justice even. Jesus says happy are those who having been hurt by another but move beyond the eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth mentality – beyond retribution and vengeance - and instead operate out of a larger God-inspired perspective and offer mercy. I know I know, it is a harrowing business considering this plan of action laid out by Jesus to herald the coming kingdom of God. Maybe this is one of the reasons we have tended to interpret the good news as being about some after-life promise because this good news is tough and radical living for the here and now, not for the faint of heart.

And in case that’s not clear, as a capstone to all the beatitudes, Jesus says, you follow any of this or all of this seriously and likely you’re not going to be appreciated for it, in fact, you might be shunned or shamed or persecuted. And so why not go ahead and say it Jesus “happy are those who are persecuted”! Blessed are those who are persecuted for being merciful and meek and dependent and vulnerable and pursuing what is right and fair and good for all, not just you and yours, but for all! Blessed are you, happy you will be at the deeper core of your life. May we learn and pursue and know some of that deeper happiness in Jesus’ name, Amen!

Invitation to Communion

Blessed are you called to this table and all of you are called; whether you've been here many times or never before, whether you have a strong and abiding faith or are filled with doubts, whether you feel a sense of God's love for you or don't know what that feels like, you are invited and called to this table. The bread symbolizes the body of Jesus which knows suffering and sorrow and the cup represents Jesus' blood which knows the spilling of one's life force to depletion. You receive these elements and invite healing into your body, mind and soul so that your life force might be restored and aligned more full to God's purposes for your life. You are welcome to receive these elements as you daily receive the very breath of life, all of it is grace, gift from God who loves you and wants to use your life as an instrument of love for others. Come for all things are ready.