

The Beatitudes

You probably have all had the experience of someone pointing out or saying something you never noticed before and after they did it either ruined it or became a bothersome distraction to you. Not long ago someone pointed out to me that one of the numbers on my house address was crooked – and it turns out it won't stay straight no matter what I do-it's just flawed. I never noticed it before, but now every time I look at the front of the house it's the one thing I notice. Well, this happened to me with the Sermon on the Mount a few years ago after someone had me watch Monty Python's "Life of Brian." You may know the scene – a crowd has gathered to listen to the Sermon on the Mount and we hear the common refrains of "Blessed are the merciful" and such. And the camera pans back to a dialogue happening in the crowd.

Someone asks, "What was that?" (because they can't hear) A guy responds, "I don't know, I was too busy gawking at big nose." Another Person says, "I think it was 'Blessed are the cheesemakers.'" Then Mrs. Gregory's character asks the man next to her: "What's so special about the cheesemakers?" And he states, "Well, obviously it's not meant to be taken literally; it refers to any manufacturers of dairy products."

So now every time I hear anyone quote the Beatitudes I start laughing. But – the Sermon on the Mount and this portion of it called the "Beatitudes" (which just means blessedness) is one of the most famous portions of Jesus' teachings. And it contains pronouncements of blessings on the most unlikely of candidates (not cheesemakers). In Luke's version that we just read Jesus tells us that among the blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated, excluded, and reviled. This is what scholars have called the "era of reversal" – the ministry of Jesus that turns everything on its head. But these Beatitudes of Jesus were not only difficult then, it's something we are still struggling with today- even though these words have been echoing throughout the church and our wider culture for nearly two thousand years. They're still so upside down to our thinking...and, I believe, we have often misunderstood the Beatitudes.

Where do we see evidence of the Beatitudes playing out in the world today? I'd argue that it's very rare. You can turn on any reality TV show and nowhere will you see people acting as though the meek and merciful, the

weak, the poor and hungry, or those who are reviled and hated are in a state of blessedness or something to aim for. On Thursday afternoon during our torrential downpour I saw a homeless man standing out in the rain absolutely soaked through and shivering holding a sign on Torrey Pines Rd. asking for food - it's a common sight, but that was harder to see than usual. In no way did it look like this impoverished and hungry man was blessed. I came across a news story this past week about a little boy named Deamonte Driver from Maryland – age 12 – who died after his infected tooth spread and caused infection in his brain - all because he'd lost his dental coverage and the cost of a tooth extraction was out of reach for his impoverished family. This is not a blessed situation. And all of us at some point can identify with the category Jesus describes as "those who weep" - do you feel blessed at those times in your life when tears and mourning overcome you? I know I haven't felt blessed then. Or what about the excluded? Have you ever been excluded in some way? Exclusion can cut deep and leave long lasting wounds. I recall being a middle schooler and being bullied by a group of youth who would throw rocks at me every day and call me terrible names. I did not feel blessed – I was terrified and I lost sleep over it for months. So people have often scoffed at the Beatitudes...or just simply ignored them. I understand why.

So what in the world is Jesus talking about in these Beatitudes? What could Jesus possibly mean when he says, "'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you.'" It seems like Jesus is calling left right and right left.

In order to understand the Beatitudes we first need to take a step back and look at the wider context of Jesus' teaching. Jesus' entire mission and purpose was laid out when he read from the prophet Isaiah at the beginning of his ministry in the Synagogue. Do you remember what it was? His ministry is to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and to set the oppressed free. And then what does Jesus invite his followers to do? Jesus calls them to give up everything – to leave their jobs – leave their nets behind and to go fish for people and follow him. He calls them to love their enemies, to pray for those who persecute them, and to give to those who ask. He calls his followers to

“take up their cross” and follow him with radical abandon.

So let's get something straight: Jesus is not, in the Beatitudes, elevating a blanket concept of poverty as in of itself a good thing. Jesus isn't equating poverty with holiness or speaking of these different forms of suffering in some kind of vacuum. In fact, that would be a twisting of the meaning of the Gospel and could even fuel oppressors to continue to oppress and justify it as a “good thing” for the victims. No. Jesus' entire ministry is one that seeks to alleviate suffering, poverty, and hunger. This concept of being blessed means – as Mary described in her Magnificat – to be “favored by God.” Jesus is not making proscriptive statements – he is making descriptive statements – these are not proscriptions on how to become blessed they are descriptions of people who have given up everything to live according to God's will and upon whom God's favor rests. Notice Jesus says, “Blessed are **You** who are poor” - it's as though he looks out at the crowd sees the poor and speaks directly to them. And certainly, those who have truly accepted the call to follow Jesus are poor because they have given so much and lived so generously. Jesus knows they, like him, weep because they have identified so lovingly and compassionately with those who are suffering, and he knows they, like him, are excluded and hated (or will be) because they have sought God's righteousness and not human power and prestige. And, at the end of the day, Jesus is revealing that God's favor and merciful love rests on those who are struggling and suffering in body, mind, or spirit...a reminder we are not alone in our struggles nor does suffering mean that God is punishing us, as was so often taught at that time.

Matthew's Gospel takes it another step further, shedding light on the Beatitudes, because in Matthew it is those who are “poor in spirit” who are blessed - poor in spirit because they are not puffed up with their own ambitions and have emptied themselves to do God's will. Mathew writes: “Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness” - those who hunger for the things of God and not the world. When you have a poverty and hunger like Matthew describes – you are “blessed” because you're sharing in God's heart for this troubled world and for your fellow humans.

If you have ever tracked your life, with all its' peaks and valleys, you know that it is almost always in the valleys we find that we are closest to the Lord. When things

are going well, when we're comfortable and things are easy, when everyone likes us and praises us, we tend to forget about God, because we are so “filled” with the things of the world...there is little room for God because we are so satisfied. We can live off of the good opinions of others, not needing God's opinion and love of us. The world provides our consolations. But the world's consolations are short sighted and temporary. When we are stripped of these things we discover our true nakedness and neediness before God and then seek God most fully. And it is in those moments God can bless us immeasurably in our hearts and souls. It is then we know what it means to be poor—when we can say we are blessed and favored by God.

The world tells us that we're just one purchase away from happiness while God's Word tells us that true joy is found in self-giving, in living generously, and in serving others –this is a Kingdom where the first are last and the last are first. And baptism reminds us of this wonderful upside kingdom as we “die” in the waters of baptism in order to be “reborn” as God's children.

Today we are baptizing two sweet baby girls – Maya Price and Isabel Ano - with them we celebrate our promises to live not only for ourselves but for others – respecting the dignity of every single human being. Baptism, like the Beatitudes, offers us a vision of a world where we can all live in radical generosity and self-giving. A world in which we no longer fear being “without.” This is a world where we trust God to meet our deepest needs and in doing so, find we are blessed beyond our wildest imaginings.