

The Beatitudes: Jesus' Startling Blessings

Matthew 5:1-12

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When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the reign of heaven.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the reign of heaven.*

*"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil
against you falsely on my account. Matthew 5:1-12 NRSV*

This may be a familiar passage. I come to the Beatitudes with some ambivalence. What do they say to us today? I read an essay this week by Debi Thomas that was helpful because she started from an important place - naming what the Beatitudes are NOT: (1)

The Beatitudes are not Hallmark greeting cards. Jesus wasn't waxing sentimental when he spoke of blessing, favor, honor. He wasn't offering us platitudes. It's easy in our consumerist culture to allow a word like "blessing" to become bland and meaningless. But the Beatitudes are not Band-aids. They're not meant to settle, soothe, and lull us to sleep; they're meant to startle us awake. Yes, they are pastoral, and yes, they can definitely give us hope. But hope is not a sedative. Hope is what gets us up and out the door.

The Beatitudes are not to-do items. They are not suggestions, instructions, commandments, or *quid pro quos*. There is nothing transactional about them, nothing that smacks of a "should," a "must," or an "ought." Jesus is not teaching to be sadder, meeker, hungrier, thirstier, purer, more peaceable, and more persecuted in order to be rewarded or blessed by God. We are already beloved and valued.

The Beatitudes are not permission slips for passivity. To use Jesus's teachings about sorrow, meekness, and persecution as if that is all acceptable is not right. There is nothing in the Beatitudes that excuses injustice, nothing that relativizes abuse, nothing that frees us to tell suffering people that their suffering is redemptive. *Nothing.*

The Beatitudes are not pie-in-the-sky. When Jesus promises his listeners the “reign of heaven,” he is not asking them to grit their teeth and wait patiently for heavenly reward after death. To possess the kin-dom, to experience comfort, to inherit the earth, to be filled, to receive mercy, to see God, to be called the children of God, and to receive a reward in heaven - this is an embodied truth. They are about the kin-dom that is already *and* not-yet, the realm of God that is present *and* coming, the reign of God’s perfect justice and mercy that is within us *and* ahead of us.

Okay, the Beatitudes are not these things. So what are they?

The Beatitudes are blessings. These early words Jesus offers his followers, his disciples — the first words the Gospel of Matthew records from Jesus’s inaugural sermon — are words of blessing. Are we listening? Blessing comes *first*. We *begin* with blessing. Blessing, not judgment. Blessing, not terms and conditions. Blessing, not penance.

He is teaching them about who they are and how to look at people. One translator suggests that “Honored” is a good translation of the Greek. Honored the meek, Honored those who mourn. Actually, no verb there. Not *Blessed are the meek*, but *honored the meek*. These teachings are declarations of honor, blessing, value, being seen.

The Beatitudes are reversals. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes a universe turned on its head. A world where the usual might-makes-right, survival-of-the-fittest hierarchies, rules, and priorities just plain don’t apply. The mourners are the ones who receive comfort. The hungry will sit, must sit, at laden tables. Those who live meekly inherit everything. The peacemakers are God’s children. This is radical discourse, not warm devotional sound bytes. These pronouncements offer us a way of describing “the pursuit of happiness” as something other than a selfish pursuit of comfort, but rather the pursuit of the good life, noble life, integrity.

What Jesus bears witness to in the Beatitudes is God’s unwavering proximity to pain, suffering, sorrow, and loss. God is nearest to those who are lowly, oppressed, unwanted, and feel broken. God isn’t obsessed with the shiny and the impressive; God is too busy sticking close to what’s messy, chaotic, unruly, and unattractive.

This is important to remember, because the first thing we may ask when we are hurting is, “Where is God? Why has God abandoned me?” The Beatitudes assure me that God doesn’t exit my life when I find myself in low places. If anything, God is *most* present in the shadows, in the valleys.

The Beatitudes are a vocation. Jesus pronounces that on the meek, the hungry, the impoverished, and the oppressed are blessed. And then he empowers the meek, he feeds the hungry, he cares for the poor, and he demands justice for the oppressed. Blessing & calling....

This week has felt particularly heavy to me. Blessed are those who mourn...Honored are those who mourn. What is our calling? I don't know. The mass shootings, the senseless gun violence in Monterey Park and Half Moon Bay and Oakland and Chicago and on and on. My heart aches.

The Beatitudes remind me of Jesus' vision of the Beloved Community, of the reign of God. I don't want to be numb. I want to let some of this sadness and grief and shock touch me. I have donated to organizations that are addressing the complexity of gun violence and how to keep fighting to lessen the presence and use of guns while trying to curb our cultural worship of gun culture.

As a congregation, I pray that the words of the Beatitudes are callings to see the world differently and to act in ways that reflect this larger vision. In our annual meeting today, we lift up some of the ways we are people of compassion and hope and justice and contemplative practices who seek to embodied Jesus' teachings. We lift up ways we seek to be with each other as we mourn, as we work for peace, as we empty and let go of what distracts us and as we work together in joy and sorrow.

Blessings that are startling and unexpected. When we read contemporary versions of Beatitudes, maybe we can hear the melody of Jesus' words but with a new setting, in a new key. Close with an excerpt from Modern Beatitudes from Enfleshed – Rev. Anna Blaedel.

blessed are you who are raging.

blessed are you who are mourning.

blessed are you who feel numb.

blessed are you who feel sick. and tired. and sick and tired.

blessed are you who refuse to turn away.

blessed are you who need to turn away.

blessed are you who keep breathing deep.

blessed are you who are tending to your own needs.

blessed are you who are tending to the needs of another.

blessed are you who have been calling.

blessed are you who have been organizing.

blessed are you who have been testifying.

blessed are you who have been hearing.

blessed are you who have been resisting.

blessed are you who feel broken open beyond repair.

blessed are you who are raw beyond words....

blessed are you who are weeping...

blessed are you who know deep in your bones that you are good. and beautiful. and beloved and sacred. and worthy. and believed. and held. and capable of healing beyond your wildest imagination.

blessed are you who remind others they are good. and beautiful. and beloved. and sacred.
and worthy. and believed. and held. and capable of healing beyond their wildest
imagination.

blessed are we when we dare to dream of a world without sexual violence, without white
supremacy, without misogyny, without police brutality, without anti-trans
and anti-queer violence.

blessed are we when we stay tender.

blessed are we when we stay fierce.

blessed are we when we dare to imagine repair, and transformation.

blessed are we when we labor together to make it so. (2)

Amen.

1) Debie Thomas, "The Blessing and the Bite," 1.26.2020 Journey with Jesus blog
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2511-the-blessing-and-the-bite>

2) Rev. Anna Blaedel, "Modern Beatitudes," enfleshed
<https://enfleshed.com/liturgy/modern-beatitudes/>