

WPC
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Blessed Are...
Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

As someone who grew up in the 1970's and 80's, when I read the passage on the Beatitudes, it's hard for me not to think of the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*. I want to show you a short scene from that movie, but I do need to warn you that the movie is, to say the least, a bit irreverent. But it makes some good points. [SHOW SCENE OF SERMON ON MOUNT, up to 2:09]

I've always liked this scene – the lines are classic: “What did he say?”

"I think it was blessed are the cheesemakers.' "

“What's so special about the cheesemakers?' "

“It's not meant to be taken literally, it refers to any manufacturer of dairy products.”

The reason I like this scene is because it reminds us of the surprising things Jesus is saying. To many of his listeners, hearing that the meek or the poor in spirit are blessed was just as surprising and unexpected as listeners today hearing “blessed are the cheesemakers.” The Beatitudes turn the

world's values upside down with their shocking promise of hope to the hopeless and power to the powerless. What's true for those who live in the power of the kingdom of God is a complete reversal of what's considered to be true in the world. N.T. Wright renders what we usually translate as "blessed" into "wonderful news" because that's just what the Beatitudes are: Jesus' announcement of some wonderful news, so wonderful that it may seem unrealistic. They are good news to God's people, those who take refuge in God alone. Yes, this is the way God intended things to be. This is the way to be truly happy.

The prophet Micah said something quite similar using different words; "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The Beatitudes announce God's new covenant.

Let's take a closer look at the context in which the Beatitudes are given. After announcing that the kingdom of heaven has come near (4:17), Jesus calls his first disciples away from being fishermen in order that they can start fishing for people (4:18-22). Great crowds come to follow him; today's text tells us he sees the crowds and heads up a mountain in order to teach. This section of Matthew is called "The Sermon on the Mount."

Since there are many echoes of the book of Exodus found in the first four chapters of Matthew, many scholars believe we ought to understand Jesus' mountaintop location accordingly: Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive God's holy law (Exod. 19); now Jesus, who is "God with us," is going up another mountain to dispense God's instruction once again.

The fact that Jesus sits down to teach is symbolic of Jewish rabbis teaching with solemn authority. Jesus spoke to an audience arranged in two groups: first the disciples, and then the crowds behind them. He begins his sermon with a series of blessings, called "the Beatitudes" because the Latin word *beatus* means "blessed."

The preamble to the U.S. Constitution states: "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

This introductory statement defines the essence of the nation's vision of itself and expresses the sort of citizenry it hopes to embody. Tom Long believes that in a similar manner, the Sermon on the Mount is the "constitution" of the church of Jesus Christ, and the Beatitudes are its "preamble." "The Beatitudes proclaim what is, in the light of the kingdom

of heaven, unassailably true. They describe the purpose of every holy law, the foundation of every custom, the aim of every practice of this new society, this colony of the kingdom, the church called and instructed by Jesus.”¹

There are nine beatitudes in all. The first eight beatitudes all follow the same pattern:

1. They all begin with the phrase “Blessed are...,” which could also be translated “joyful are...” or “happy are...”
2. They all have a statement identifying who these blessed ones are by naming a character trait
3. They all end with a promise of a specific reward, usually expressed in the future tense.

The nine beatitudes are presented in three groups. David Nienhuis of SPU notes that the first four (5:3–6) include precisely 36 words in the Greek (3 x 12, the number for Israel), with each beatitude describing someone suffering in some way. The second four (5:7–10) also include exactly 36 words and describe attitudes and behaviors that might lead to the aforementioned struggles. Significantly, the final beatitude in each of these

¹ Tom Long, *Matthew*, p. 46-47.

two sets of four ends with the word “righteousness” (5:6; 10), as though righteousness is the end to which all these point.

The final summary beatitude (5:11–12) addresses the hearer directly (“blessed are you”), underscores the reality of suffering in the life of the disciple, and introduces the notion of “heavenly reward,” which will orient the entire sermon.²

Long notes that the use of verb tenses in the initial eight beatitudes is quite subtle and theologically important. Each beatitude begins in the present tense: “Blessed *are*...” In other words, those who are blessed are joyful *now*, in the present. In six of the beatitudes, however, the specific reason why they are blessed lies not in the present, but in the future (“they will...”). “What this indicates is that the church, the community of Christ, is a joyful people, but the source of their joy is not that they live easy lives in a happy world or that things are getting better every day, but that their trust is in God’s coming kingdom.”³

I don’t have time to go through and examine each of the beatitudes individually – that’s a whole sermon series of its own. For today, I want to make one reflection on the beatitudes as a whole.

² David Nienhuis, SPU Lectio, <http://blog.spu.edu/lectio/the-sermon-on-discipleship/>

³ Long, p. 47.

One primary accusation against a Christian life is that it's "not real." The Christian way of life simply doesn't match up with the facts of living in the real world. William Willimon tells the story of the night he joined others for a big service of worship at the National Cathedral in Washington. The bombing of Iraq had begun. President Bush, Sr., being an Episcopalian, had met earlier with the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. He had urged President Bush not to bomb Iraq, to give sanctions a chance, to work through diplomacy to settle our differences. Basically, President Bush told the bishop that sometimes, as a President, you had to face up to reality.

The bishop, urging restraint, came off looking rather wimpish. Mr. Bush, who had earlier been accused of being a wimp, came off looking practical, pragmatic, strong, and realistic.

Now, many years later, Mr. Bush is long out of office with the future of Iraq still in question. It's enough to make one ask, "Who defines what's real?"

Few texts are as "unreal" as today's passage on the Beatitudes. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who mourn. When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left. Do not resist an evildoer. If a soldier commands you to carry his burden for one mile, go the second mile.

Willimon says, “Much of this sounds like a recipe for being a full-time ‘door mat’ for the world. Of course, it sounds that way because we know the ‘real world.’ In the real world, if someone hits you on the right cheek, and you offer up the other one, then you end up with two bruised cheeks. If you agree to carry someone’s burden for two miles, then these people usually ask that you carry it for ten. In the real world, the meek get taken advantage of. Those who are wronged and persecuted get a lawyer. But let us admit that we are begging the prior question of who defines what is real.”⁴

But Jesus tells us that a new world is coming which will be far more real than the world we currently live in. Jesus himself was a sign that, by the grace of God, reality was making a fundamental shift. Granted, the world that he describes is not here yet, not in its fullness. There’s plenty of old world around for people to think that it’s the only world there is.

And yet, in his sermon, Jesus switches from the future tense to the present tense. “He tells us what to do, here, now, if we want to be part of the new world that is coming...Every time we forgive, or do not return evil for

⁴ William Willimon, “The Real World,” Pulpit Resource, Jan. 30, 2011, p. 23.

evil, we show our citizenship. A little piece of the new reality becomes visible in you.”⁵

The reason it’s so important for Christians to gather together every Sunday in worship is so we can remind each other that God is in charge and he ultimately determines what is real. A new world is coming, and is already among us, a world where the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the ones persecuted for righteousness’ sake, and yes, even the cheesemakers, are truly blessed. Amen.

⁵ Willimon, p. 24.