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BEATITUDES FOR OUR TIME

It is a very strange task to preach a sermon on the world's most famous sermon. It's like doing a courtroom sketch of the Mona Lisa, or humming a few bars of Beethoven's ninth symphony. This is the Constitution of the Christian faith, the white hot center of the gospel – it's most radical list of teachings. Any sensible person would just read it in hushed tones, sit down, and ask the listener if their life insurance was paid. These blessings turn the world as we know it upside down. To take them seriously is to question almost everything we think we know about the life of faith and what it means to be a disciple of The Way of Jesus.

First of all, isn't it great that around the time of the Super Bowl, we read in American churches: Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth? Or for that matter, in the land of "take no prisoners and show no mercy" we read, Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy? Or in the age of Facebook and social networking sites that allow people to be in relationship with the most artificially loveable electronic version of themselves and their friends, we read, Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account?

Upon hearing one of the beatitudes, J. Paul Getty is famous for having said, "The meek shall inherit the earth, but not the mineral rights." What are we to make of a society in which chronic obesity, especially in children, has become our number one health issue, but we have churches with fast food outlets in them and then from the pulpit we read this: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Would you like that supersized?

People generally react to the nine blessings that begin the Sermon on the Mount by finding them poetic, lyrical, ideal for crocheting and hanging on your

grandmother's parlor wall, but hardly a roadmap for living in this dog-eat-dog world. They are like the incense that is swung about in many cathedrals, fragrant but safely non-specific. We admire the beatitudes, but deep down we fear the implications of putting them into actual practice. That is true of the Christian faith generally speaking. We love the sound of it, but we fear the practice of it, lest we end up being so strange that people whisper about us and suggest therapy.

So, first of all, what is a beatitude? When we say it is a "blessing," we are disadvantaged by the connotations of that word in our time. In the time of Jesus a blessing listed virtues that anyone would be pleased to have to survive in a brutal world and their advantageous consequences. Blessed are the wise, for they shall not be fooled. Blessed are the strong, for their enemies shall fear them. Blessed are the wealthy, for they shall never go hungry. That sort of thing.

You can almost substitute the word "happy" for the word "blessed" and the meaning won't change much. The French translation is *debonair*. *Debonair* are those who have diversified their stock portfolio, for their old age shall be secure.

In every instance, a blessing was a condition or virtue which brought good rewards. In modern fundamentalist rhetoric, when someone says "This ministry is a "blessing" to you, they are not talking about some abstract intangible blessing. By and large, this is a code word for material abundance. When a TV evangelist starts talking about the ways in which God has "blessed" him, he isn't referring to peace of mind. He's talking about the car he is driving and the house he's living in.

It was no different in the time of Jesus. When religious leaders pronounced blessings upon those who were wise, strong, or righteous, there was a reward implicit in that kind of pronouncement. Religion was supposed to pay off, not simply provide solace or a feeling of being "one with the universe."

When Matthew records his version of the Sermon on the Mount, as the most Jewish of all the gospel writers, he has Jesus go up on the mountain, as Moses did, then sit down, as rabbis do, to teach a set of sayings that we probably preserved in the synoptic gospel that scholars call Q, a source that was available to the first century gospel writers of Matthew and Luke, but is now lost to us.

And it is important to remember that these "Blessings" occur in the context of the apocalyptic realm of God. For Matthew, history is divided into

two ages: the present evil era that God will soon end, and the coming realm when all things will take place according to God's purposes of love and justice. So in anticipation of this new age, which has both begun and has yet to be fulfilled, these blessings take the orthodox formulas of rabbinical wisdom and turn them upside down, just as the coming reign of God will turn everything upside down.

And notice – the beatitudes are in the indicative mode, not the imperative. Nobody is ordering anyone to do anything. Nobody is shouting here: We must all be meek! Go out therefore and get meek! And nobody is warning people who are not meek of the consequences of being anything but meek. Woe to you non-meek, for you shall burn in the unquenchable fire reserved for bullies. These are the blessings given to those who already possess certain ways of being and acting in the world – because in the coming reign of God, they will be recognized by God as true wisdom. Showing mercy is how one receives mercy. Violence is a downward spiral, or to put it another way, “those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.”

The emphasis of every blessing is upon three virtues: simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion. The “poor in spirit” may not count for much in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of God what some people call “nobodies” are really “somebody's” to God.

Those who mourn, openly and properly are not in a hurry to “get over it” or have “closure,” will be comforted. It won't happen by the weekend, and it won't happen at the mall. It will happen only when we weep aloud, and walk with sadness and a profound teacher – and when we give to others the right to be sad and to grieve without apology.

As for the pure in heart, those are the people who trust other people, who give them the benefit of the doubt, who do not fear in others what they secretly fear in themselves. Sometimes this means they get taken advantage of, except that it doesn't matter, because they are not the point.

As for the peacemakers, they are almost always the most misunderstood of all. They get in the middle of the world's crass and greedy free-for-all and end up getting hit from both sides. They are not soft or anything, mind you. They simply don't believe that true non-violence has ever been systematically tried. Oh, here and there, a remarkable person has shown us its effectiveness in a given cause or movement, but it's not been tried by whole nations who fear it will encourage the very violence it abhors.

Look no further than this morning's headlines. The Arab world is exploding in a people's movement that can no longer be suppressed. The last

few days in Cairo and across the Arab world is a harbinger of things to come. Cell phones and the internet have given ordinary people the means to communicate and organize. Our blind support for Israel and for corrupt Arab governments has come home to roost. Arab youth will no longer accept hopelessness, and some were giving flowers to the soldiers. Does that sound familiar?

As Israel bulldozes more Palestinian homes and builds more illegal settlements while calling itself a “partner for peace,” the thing that Israel’s leadership fears the most is a non-violence movement by Palestinians. As long as we are trading threats and bombs, we can do everything in the name of national security. But if someone turns the other cheek, the game is up. If Palestinians would walk across their version of the Edmond Pettis bridge, the brutal apartheid that is our treatment of those without a homeland would be immediately apparent.

Our policy toward the Arab world for the last century has been simple, said David Brooks of the New York Times, “Sell us your oil, and whatever you do in your own backyard is your business.” Accept our military invasions as the necessary price you pay for our addiction to the oil you sit on but we must have. Accept our form of democracy and do nothing to threaten our national security. As it turns out, all Empires learn the same lesson eventually. They all end up falling on their own swords.

My prayer is that the Egyptian army will not turn on its own people, and that Mubarak will see the writing on the wall. If you will excuse an old hippie for saying it this morning – about my Arab sisters and brother who awakened to the futility of their lives and want to change things: power to the people.

And last but not least, according to the upside down world of the beatitudes, Jesus says that there is a special blessing in store for those who are persecuted and reviled for righteousness sake. That is, not for people who simply love being mad prophets decrying the hypocrisies of our time, drunk on their own self-declared righteousness, but those who have truly given themselves over to the cause of peace and justice, and yet, who are not blind to the shortcomings in themselves. Expect the road to be rough; expect the price to be high; the kingdom of God is not for the faint of heart.

If you believe that what you are doing you are doing on behalf of a loving and merciful God (and not to advance your own causes or reputation, not for the secret purpose of feeling deliciously superior), then it doesn’t matter what other people think, or say. In the infamous words of the little man who played the mighty and powerful Wizard of Oz, “Pay no attention to that man behind the

curtain, pulling all those levers frantically trying to control us all through fear. Love God and neighbor and then do what you will. The God who loves life, hates violence, wants truth, hates lying; wants compassion, hates cruelty; wants peace, hates war – the God who is revealed to us by Jesus of Nazareth as a Householder who practices non-violent distributive justice. The God who wants everyone to have enough.

Give your allegiance to no other system or ideology that is of human origin, because it will ultimately lead to idolatry of one kind or another. Do not be consumed with the acquisition of stuff, or sooner or later you will be tricked into believing that you are defined by your stuff. Then, when it is gone (because sooner or later, you will be separated from it), you will fall into despair, thinking that now that you have nothing, you are nothing.

It may look strange, looking at the world upside down. But then, consider how strange we look trying to run it our way – right side up, but perishing. The Sermon on the Mount is the most compact, the most revolutionary manifesto in the history of the world. And it continues to amaze me that the Bible which contains it has not been removed from the library to protect our children. Rather, to the contrary, it is endlessly recommended by right-side up people to other right-side up people in order to keep the world right side up.

So, in my strange way, I wondered this week what a modern rendering of the beatitudes might sound like? It is an audacious thing to consider, but I can't help it. This is not to improve on the original, mind you, just to make it a little more uncomfortable.

When Jesus saw the crowds at the free medical clinic, he went to the back of the line, sat down, and he began to teach the uninsured, saying, "Blessed are you who have nothing, but still help one another, for your bodies may be racked but your humble spirits have already been healed.

Blessed are you who notice when one of your friends is weeping and who sits with them, for comfort comes to those who do not pretend that life is a happy meal, or a new set of wheels, or a winning lottery ticket. Pain is nobody's friend, but it does cut through a lot of silliness.

Blessed are the simple, gentle people of the earth who live in the shadows of fame and fortune but who are not bitter or jealous, for the earth and all its abundance already belongs to them.

Blessed are those whose late-night cravings are for human connection, for peace of mind, for the cup of kindness, for another round of laughter, for they will push away from the table of contentment, put their hands over their heart and say, "I'm stuffed."

Blessed are those who look the beggar who may be a scammer right in the eye and remember that it's not what someone does with the dollar you give away that matters; it's what you will do with the one you keep that doesn't. Blessed are those who part easily with what came easily to them.

Blessed are those whose heart is like a filter, purifying what the world serves up tainted by selfishness and deception, and runs it patiently through again and again and again until it comes out redeemed and luminous.

Blessed are those who put down their guns, who decide not to wear any uniform, who study peace instead of war, who pray for their enemy instead of killing them - and who may pay the price, but who will not pay the piper. Blessed are those who give peace a chance for they shall be called naive, but not by God.

Blessed are those who run into trouble by trying to get other people out of trouble. Not because they enjoy the attention, but because they can't sleep well when so much lying is causing so much misery and so little truth even bothers to show up.

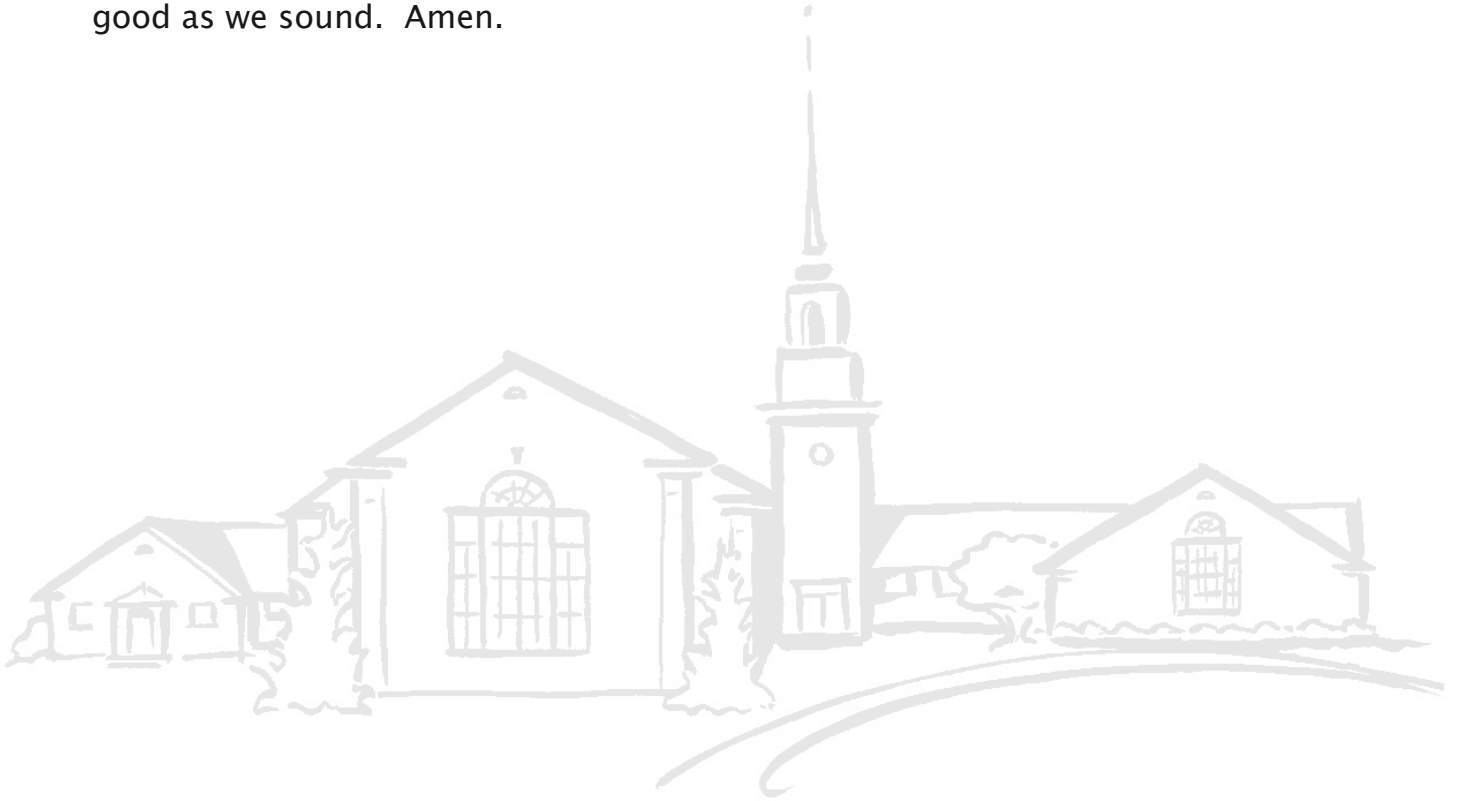
Blessed are you when someone calls you a prophet and you have no idea what they are talking about, because all you did was tell people the secrets of their own hearts and that made them cranky. Your reward will not be in the number of friends you have on Facebook, but in the number of people who trust you to speak for those without a voice, and to challenge those without a conscience. Lying is easy, and often lucrative. Telling the truth is terrifying, and disorienting, and dangerous - and so it has always been. Come quickly Lord Jesus.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayers for Sunday, January 30, 2011

Lord of Life, we ask for the courage and wisdom to practice what we preach, to be as gracious as the grace we recommend, to be as non-violent as we are clever. As a community, we are held together not by uniformity or opinion, but by a spirit of love and acceptance, patience and forgiveness. If there are any among us who do not value this community or who would rather be right than be loving, then we pray for healing and for reconciliation. Life is too short to

spend it trying to win arguments. Life is too precious to waste it on games of one-ups-manship. Life is too hard to not extend a helping hand instead of a word of advice. Be with us this day as we seek to be a community of compassion and generosity. People are watching us, and hoping that we are as good as we sound. Amen.



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