

“Peculiar Blessings” GPPC 1-29-17  
Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12

Maybe you’ve heard this old story. A preacher and an astronomer were having a discussion one day. And the astronomer said, “You preachers have a way of messing up things. I don’t need to come to church to learn about faith. And I don’t need complicated Bible commentaries to muddy my beliefs. You see the Christian faith is a simple thing. It can all be summed up in the Golden Rule, ‘Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.’” The preacher thought for a second and then said, “You know I’ve decided that astronomy is a simple subject too. There’s no need for professors and complex textbooks and peering through telescopes. Instead it can all be summed up simply, in a song no less. “Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are . . .”

There is a tendency in our culture to think that the Bible and the Christian faith are practically effortless to understand. The words of Scripture are self-evident. The great doctrines of Christianity are obvious. All we need to know about the Bible and our faith we learned in kindergarten.

But though individual faith may be relatively simple, the Bible and the Christian faith are complicated. And sometimes the words of the Bible, especially the words of Jesus, go against what we call “common sense.”

The words Jesus speaks in Matthew 5:1-12 especially are *not* common sense. They are not words “to make friends and influence people,” or advice on how to be a financial success. In fact, Jesus’ words completely challenge the way we look at the world.

Matthew says Jesus saw the crowds. Then he went up the mountain—a place where God’s revelation often took place. And after he sat down (a posture assumed by someone who taught), his disciples came to Jesus. So we know that what Jesus said may have been overheard by the crowd, but it was especially paid attention to by his disciples, by followers who were hungry for God’s truth he was sharing.

Are we hungry for God’s truth revealed by Jesus too?

“Blessed,” he said nine times. The Greek word means “fortunate, happy... [to be the] privileged recipient of divine favor.” But what a peculiar list of blessings.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

What a strange thing to say! Maybe by this Jesus is saying, “Happy are people who realize they are at the end of their rope, who know they can’t make it on their own, who see with utter clarity that they must rely upon God and God’s strength.” Maybe that’s what he means.

Many years ago when I was living in Pennsylvania, I remember visiting the relative of a church member incarcerated in a medium-security prison. While visiting, I ran into the prison chaplain and we began to talk. I said, “Wow! You really have a difficult ministry working with prisoners.” And he said, “Actually, I think my ministry is easier than yours. Your people are doing well and they think they don’t need God. The people in the prison have hit bottom and they are hungry for God.”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Again, we want to say, “Really, Jesus? Happy are people who mourn?” A scholar says the mourning here is a reference to Isaiah 61 and God’s comfort for “those who mourned the devastation of Israel and mourned...the disobedience that

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brought such punishment upon the nation (see Isaiah 60:10). (Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, 38.)

And blessed are people who see the world today and mourn injustice, greed, lies, and destruction. Blessed are those who are awake enough to see that something is wrong, and that God's will is not being done.

Divinity school Professor Richard Lischer writing about the death of his son, a young man, from brain cancer says, "Love is a harsh comforter, because only love makes genuine loss possible. You can't lose what you never loved." (Richard Lischer, *Stations of the Heart*, 7.)

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

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

Surely you jest, dear Jesus. Everybody knows that only the strong survive and mean people prosper. As children, bullies pick on the vulnerable and when they grow up they enact policies to continue

picking on the vulnerable. The meek are just weaklings who need to learn to be tougher.

But that's not what Jesus means by meek. The Greek word for meek means "not being overly impressed by a sense of one's self-importance." It means being "gentle, humble, considerate."

Meek, of course, is the opposite of pride. Pride is a form of an idolatry. It's self-worship, rather than God-worship. And though pride appears to be comfortable and strong, it's actually painful and weak, because it is obsessed with self and protecting self-image and cannot find the true strength of loving connection with others and connection with God.

A writer tells the story of "this man and all his people [who] lived on a bed of nails." As we can imagine, this was a painful existence. On and on, day after day, it was miserable living on a bed of nails. One day he decided he'd had enough; get better or end it all. And he heard a voice. "Get small." He thought maybe he'd misheard. "What?" "Get

small,” said the Voice. Each time he asked for clarification the Voice just kept saying, “Get small.” Finally, the man said, “I can’t get small.” But the Voice said, “I can make you small.” “All right,” he said, “Make me small.” And the writer says, “The first thing he noticed was that his clothes got big. Then the nails got big. Then the space between the nails got big and he found himself between the nails. Then the space between the nails got so big that there was more space than nails. Then there was so much space it seemed as if there were no nails at all. Then he was surrounded by people. They brought him clothes to wear that were light and airy, and wonderful food that was as rich as the ground was smooth. It was a strange feeling, but it seemed like he had finally come home.”

(David M. Griebner, “Between the Nails,” in *Weavings*, September/October 1995, 43-44.)

“Get small.” “Blessed are the meek.”

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

Again, we look around and observe that this is so often untrue. People hunger and thirst for righteousness that never comes. They die

with the name of God on their lips and their rights still denied. What does Jesus mean?

Maybe he means that if we hunger and thirst for all people to be treated fairly, for a world where everybody has enough, and nobody has too much, then one day we'll get what we want. God's righteousness is coming like a tsunami. It can be slowed, but it cannot be stopped.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

In a world built on revenge, this flies in the face of cold, hard logic, doesn't it? Everybody knows when we are harmed we *need* to get revenge, right?

Only that's not really true. Scientists have studied the long-term effect of human emotions on the human body. Do you know which emotion is associated with better health? It's gratitude. It's good for us to be grateful. We gather for worship each Sunday more than anything else just to say thank you to God. And it's just a side benefit that gratitude is also good for our bodies.

But do you know which emotion is most destructive for human beings? It's revenge. There is no emotion more dangerous for us than to dwell upon getting back at someone, imagining how we'll get even. As someone has said, "Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die." But as Mark Twain put it, "Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it."

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

In our X-rated, obscenity-laden world, this seems positively quaint, doesn't it? Maybe we sigh and say, "Jesus, I've lived awhile and been around the block. In fact, I think they named the block after me. You know it's a little late for me to be pure." What about us, we who are not so pure?

Frederick Buechner says, "Not the totally pure but the 'pure in heart,' to use Jesus' phrase, the ones who may be as shop-worn and clay-footed as the next one but have somehow kept some inner freshness and innocence intact." (Frederick Buechner, *Whistling In The Dark*, 19.)

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

Again, in a world in which we seem always ready to pounce upon each other and to schedule the next military invasion, the tendency is to sneer, “What’re you trying to be, a peacemaker?”

But the biblical word for peace, means the wholeness of all creation. So peacemakers work to protect the environment. They look for peaceful ways to resolve disagreements in personal relationships, in families, in faith communities, and in countries. Yet being a peacemaker does not mean having to keep silence about what is right. It means searching for ways to speak the truth in love and seeking ways to listen, especially when the stakes and emotions are high. Peacemakers build bridges not walls. And they are persistent, ever so persistent.

And that leads to the last two beatitudes, beatitudes that seem to be connected. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people

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revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Please raise your hand if you felt happy when somebody insulted you and mistreated you for following Jesus.

Again, this is hard. But it happens all the time. People who try to work for God’s justice and mercy are going to get verbally trashed. People who seek to speak God’s truth in the face of lies sometimes are going to be hurt or killed. Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered because he was speaking God’s truth and doing God’s ministry. So he joined the prophets and martyrs who had gone before him in faith. Are we ready to join that company too? Blessed.

None of these beatitudes makes sense apart from God’s final victory over all suffering, evil, and death in Jesus Christ. None of these beatitudes makes any sense unless God finally puts things right and we

have the faith to believe in God who puts things right, and who will enable us to live into that hope.

Do we believe?

Professor David Bartlett says, “Years ago when our sons were small, our family was on a camping trip. Before dinner I went with the boys to the camp restroom to wash up for the meal. After we had washed our hands, I reached up to the towel dispenser to get a paper towel for each of the boys, but our younger son protested loudly: ‘I can do it myself.’

“Since he was rather short and the towel dispenser rather high, I puzzled what would happen next until he made it clear: ‘Come on, Daddy, lift me up so I can do it myself.’”

And so we pray, “Lord, these blessings you place before us are too high for us, children that we are. So lift us up. Lift us up, that we might be empowered to be your faithful and blessed servants. Through Christ our Lord.” Amen. ©Jeff Paschal