

St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Sunday February 16, 2025

Text: Luke 6:17-26

Preacher: Christopher McLaren

In his book of poems *Holy Luck*, Eugene Peterson says, “that the characteristic quality of the Beatitudes is the ruthless and unqualified rejection of the common understanding of what it means to take up with the world and then it’s replacement of that understanding with a total reorientation of the imagination as we take up with the way followers of Jesus speak and act in the Kingdom of God.” The beatitudes are a blatant declaration of independence from the ways of the world.

Scripture tells us over and over again that God sees differently than we do, “**the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look upon the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart.**”

The beatitudes are inviting us to see differently, to let ourselves be moved by the spirit, to allow our religious imagination to come alive. In short, the beatitudes are seriously subversive speech.

According to Luke, Jesus had pulled an all-nighter on the mountain praying. Jesus called his disciples to him and together they went down to meet the people near the shore of the sea of Tiberias on the flat ground there, the plain. Luke wants us to see how accessible Jesus is, that he is among the people to whom he spoke, a person that they could touch and see and relate to. There were people from all over the region hoping for an experience of Jesus. The charisma of Jesus was the reason for their gathering. Everyone wants a piece of him for he radiates healing power.

Abruptly Jesus began to teach in the midst of the crowd. What came out of his mouth was a series of sayings called the beatitudes, blessings he pronounced on those present. What is a beatitude? Well beatitudes are essentially two-part affirmations that often sum up what we might think of as common knowledge about a good life.

“Blessed are they who have good 401k plans for they shall be comfortable in retirement.”

“Blessed are they who floss regularly, for they shall keep their choppers.”

This was a way of talking that people knew something about. So, when Jesus opens his mouth to speak the beatitudes, “Blessed are...” They were ready for some nuggets of wisdom to fall from his lips. However, it did not exactly go to plan.

“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.

And he kept going:

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

They had never heard anything like this before and it was not exactly welcome.

The beatitudes of Jesus were a kind of reversal of fortunes that was disorienting. Why was this remarkable man connecting things like poverty, hunger, weeping and hatred with blessedness? This was all passing strange. Many people in the crowds knew what it meant to be poor or hungry or grieving but Jesus was messing with the formula and saying that there would be a reversal of expectations. Blessed are the poor, ... for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are the hungry.... For you will be filled. Jesus' kingdom was an upside-down kingdom, Jesus saw things that others did not.

Jesus didn't stop there he added a series of Woes, or as someone dubbed them "woeitudes." The woes were a lot like Jesus' beatitudes except for in the woes, things that most people think are good and strive for, like wealth, food, laughter and a good reputation are equated with unfortunate states. Like woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. This kind of talk was shocking to people.

Oh, I know you've heard these before, sometimes our familiarity with things gets in the way of us understanding. It's important to realize how jarring these sayings of Jesus were to the people around him.

Perhaps we could shock ourselves by making up some modern ones:

Blessed are the depressed for they will have a peaceful mind.
Blessed are you who have lost your faith for you will see God face to face.

Woe to you with advanced degrees for you will work the drive through.
Woe to you with fancy cars for you shall soon be hoofing it.

I'm sure we could go on...

Jesus' teaching sounds different depending on who you are and one's place in the world. If you happen to be someone who is hungry, Jesus' words sound pretty good. But if you are well fed and shopping at Whole Paycheck, I mean Whole Foods, Jesus' woes might be more concerning. The beatitudes and woeitudes sound different depending on who is hearing them. But no matter who you are, they remain paradoxical and surprising, within them is a strange turning.

Perhaps you're saying, I'm not sure I like the Bible. Most of us are reading these sayings from a place of plenty. We have enough to eat. In fact, by global standards we are living in remarkable prosperity never before experienced in all of human history. Is this woe about going hungry directed at us? Most of us are pretty respectable people who have generally worked hard and made good choices. We are trying to follow Jesus. What would we feel like if others were reviling and speaking against us because of our faith?

Why does the Bible have to make us so uncomfortable? Sometimes reading the Bible makes us actually feel bad. We take the off-ramp into the land of guilt and shame, feeling that we just can't live like this. We are not willing to sell all we have and give it to poor. We feel a vague sense of guilt about all that we have especially when we truly encounter need. And it happens in other ways too, sometimes the grief of others swamps us and we find ourselves avoiding those in deep grief as if it's contagious. Maybe when you encounter the challenging teachings of

Jesus you secretly throw up your hands and just ignore parts of the Bible as spiritual advice that almost no one else really follows anyway.

I think it is a mistake to give up trying to understand what Jesus is saying. The Beatitudes tell us something about the discrepancy between God's vision for human life and the way we humans are actually living. The difference between these two visions drive the blessings and the woes of the beatitudes. The world is not like it is supposed to be. The beatitudes are like corrective lenses.

This present world is out of sync with God's ways and because of this all of its judgments are at best provisional. The way our world judge's success or failure or happiness or despair is not the way it should be nor is it lasting. The beatitudes and woes tell us that so much of what the world thinks and does is not in tune with God's ways, with God's dream for creation. In these wisdom sayings, Jesus is revealing profound spiritual foundations and asking us to go deep into the heart of God rather than to unreflectively follow our dominant culture.

I Timothy 6:17-19 says something similar.

¹⁷ As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹ thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Jesus is inviting us into this **“life that is really life!”** Jesus wants us to begin to think and act in the world in ways that honor God’s dream instead of just blindly parroting our culture. There is a different way to be, called the kingdom of God.

I want to be careful here as I do not believe that the beatitudes and woeitudes are some sort of to-do list they are a way of life transformed. I don’t think that they can be understood as advice or directives. Jesus clearly gave advice throughout his ministry. He said other difficult things like “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Jesus could speak in active verbs: love, do, bless, pray, forgive...

In the beatitudes Jesus is offering something different. He is awakening us to the strange and beautiful ways of God. Jesus is inviting us into life that is really life.

“Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” What does it mean to share the values of God instead of the values of the dominant culture? Jesus is describing what happens when you realize your need of God, your own impoverished vision, your own hardness of heart, and tender but tentative desire to follow in God’s ways. Blessed, Happy, Lucky are you when you realize you are bankrupt without God.

When we begin to follow God’s ways, to see as God sees, to respect the dignity of every human being, to strive for justice and peace among all people, when we realize how broken our world is with its greed and competition with our need to win no matter what the cost, then we are beginning to recognize our poverty, we are beginning to see what God desires.

This is of course is the beginning of wisdom, this is the beginning of the radical transformation of our imaginations, the arrival of the kingdom of God.

It is not something you can achieve by sheer force of will, unfortunately it's not a scouting badge you can earn, it's a gift of the Spirit, it's a quickening within you. Oh it's not that you cannot do anything to seek the Kingdom of God, you can open yourself to God through silence and prayer and song, you can meditate on the strange and wonderful words of scripture, you can surround yourself with people are in search of the kingdom of God, you can apprentice yourself to people you meet who seem to radiate the blessedness for which you are searching, you can pay attention to the miracles of everyday life all around you. The Blessedness and Woes surround us every day.

Oh, you will know it when you see it, when you sense God at work. Some us have been trying or partly trying to discover the kingdom for years. Sometimes we catch glimpses of it, sometimes our lives virtually vibrate with God's delight, sometimes we fall back into our fear and captivity to the way things are and lose sight of the way God desires them to be. Sometimes we forget that there is something larger that matters, larger than our troubles, larger than our city, larger than our national politics, that larger reality is the kingdom of God, God's dream for human thriving.

I believe that if you continue to seek first this strange and wonderful kingdom of God, the beatitudes will begin to make more sense. Once you know your need of God then you will see other's needs more clearly. You will rejoice when the hungry are fed (it's not wrong to have

righteous anger about the wealthiest country in the world cutting off aid to the poorest people), you will reach out to those who mourn for in comforting them your own peace will deepen, you will not worry if you are seen as an odd person, a prophet, a lover of God's wildly diverse creation, because you can feel that deep down God's heart is breaking for those in misery, need, and pain.

The beatitudes are dangerous speech, they are a revolution coming for your soul, a master class for your spiritual imagination. The beatitudes are not a to do list. You cannot get an A in this course. **You can only allow them to ruin you for this world.** And, of course, that is part of the laughter, once you are grafted into the kingdom way of being you can find joy even in the darkest of times because you know that God's ways are beyond our knowing. When you are a kingdom of God person you can find joy in the everyday moments of caring for one who mourns, giving a sack lunch to an unhoused neighbor, and in protecting those who are most vulnerable.

I think of that wonderful scene in the film, "Chariots of Fire" when young Scottish Missionary Eric Liddell and Olympic runner says, "God made me for a purpose, he also made me fast and when I run, I feel God's pleasure." Jesus is saying, hey when you stand up for what you know God cares about, when you call out injustice, when you speak truth to power, when you cloth people and feed them and remind people of the dignity of every human being you are going to feel God's pleasure, you are going to be blessed. It doesn't mean that it might not be painful or dangerous or uncomfortable to be God's person in the world but that is what you are here for and when you are in sync with the Kingdom of God this life of blessedness comes upon you without measure, the joy of God's pleasure shot through with longing.

Oh yes and the longing, the longing for others to know God. The wild hope that deluded and destructive human beings are not lost, they too can be transformed by God the wildest most compassionate being in existence. When the beatitudes begin to take up residence within you: you grow in love and compassion, you can see that those in search of riches and power have chosen a counterfeit life as opposed to “the life that is really life.” Those who laugh now because the present state of injustice is enriching and supporting them will eventually mourn. For eventually, God will have the last word and since they have opted against God’s ways they will weep.

The beatitudes are prophetic speech meant to wake us from our slumber, to reorient us to the ways of God’s coming kingdom. A kingdom that is already in our mist, found within the present struggle, and coming into existence even now as people mourn and grieve and fear the world is gathering its strength to oppose the good. The beatitudes are a check against us rationalizing the present injustices. They are meant to fire our imaginations and to keep us honest. God’s word cannot be coopted to justify unjust social conditions and cruelty toward the most vulnerable, nor can God’s word be used to justify the destruction of systems for feeding the hungry and healing the sick, or caring for children. The woes are as real as the blessings in God’s economy.

So much is packed into so few words, just four paradoxical blessings and four mind bending Woes. These words have more than enough power to renovate our souls and ready us for life in the kingdom of God. The beatitudes are nothing less than a total reorientation of the imagination as we take up with the way followers of Jesus speak and act in the Kingdom of God.

What remains is to apprentice ourselves to Jesus for the joyful renovation of our souls. What we desire is life that is really life no counterfeits will do.

The powerful words of Michael Curry our former presiding Bishop Michael Curry continue to ring in my ears and in my hear: **“If it is not loving, liberating and life-giving it is not of God.”**

Or as the Apostle Paul exhorts in his letter to the Romans:

Do not **be** conformed to this world, but **be transformed by** the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

~ Romans 12: 2

Blessed are you, Happy are you, Marked by Holy Luck are you who open yourselves to God’s ways. Let God’s light shine through you.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not and will not overcome it. (John 1: 5)

May it be so, Amen.