

Sermon on the Mount Part 1: The Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-12 by Patty Friesen (February 2/20)

In Matthew's gospel today, Jesus goes up to a mountain to preach. Which mountain? It doesn't really matter. For Jewish listeners, the mountain is a reminder us of Moses on Mt. Sinai giving the Ten Commandments to Israel. On today's mountain, Jesus is delivering a new law or an additional commentary to the law that Moses gave. On the Mount of Transfiguration in chapter 17, Jesus meets Moses again, a further confirmation of Jesus' authority to interpret Moses for his time.

As Anabaptists, we interpret the Law of Moses for our time. We believe that while the Old Testament and New Testament are in important relationship and conversation - they do not hold equal theological weight or authority for our beliefs and actions. Today's Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount is the peak of authority and theological weight for Anabaptist theology. It has always been so. Menno Simons using the Sermon on the Mount said: True Evangelical Faith cannot lie sleeping. It feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, sets the prisoner free and comforts the destitute. In fact the Sermon on the Mount is so essential for Mennonites that we have been called the Mounties.

The Sermon on the Mount includes chapters 5, 6 and 7 with the Beatitudes in chapter 5 being the introduction and the Lord's Prayer in the middle in Matthew 6 and chapter 7 is further instruction on non-violent behaviour.

As a literary form, the beatitudes or the "blessed are those" language was widely used in the ancient world. Greek literature, for example, speaks of the happy state of the Greek gods, of parents who have fine children, of finding love and its bliss and of

those with knowledge or piety. In Greek literature, happiness is found in the perfect human life or mere good luck. In Jewish writings we find two different types of beatitudes. The earliest type occurs in the Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes which do not promise happiness from a perfect life or good luck but an earthly life full of meaningful purpose and life-giving relationship to God and others. Psalm 1 - Blessed are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers but who delight in God and meditate on God's ways. They are like trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.

The second type of beatitude reflects joy in the next world. "Blessed are you righteous ones for glorious is your portion in the next life." Here are blessings in knowing that one will be part of a new order that is bigger than this present life. They do not describe a life that is guaranteed to bring success in this world but living faithfully in this world brings about a new order in the next one.

In general, the beatitudes are about faith actualized in behaviour. They are not about perfect behaviour or always getting it right but about intention, heart, mindfulness and spiritual orientation. The Beatitudes are the personal character and community we form as a joyful response to God's work in us. It is a validation of our status in God - not a demand for perfection. It is a lifestyle that we are called into a state of being that we create. It is not passive resignation to hardships but a reorientation and empowerment to take hardships and make them work for us.

Beatitude #1 **Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.**

The International Children's Bible translation captures best the poor in spirit intention of

this verse: The poor in spirit are those who know they have great spiritual needs. The Message translations says Blessed are those who are at the end of their rope. The poor in spirit refers to those who, regardless of their economic or social status, manifest humble dependence on God's grace. The beatitude challenges those who forget their need for God and begin scaling the slippery heights of ambition. The quality of being poor in spirit is the wellspring of active faith, humility and confidence. It acknowledges that God is our ultimate source of insight and wisdom and challenges us to think not too highly nor too poorly of ourselves but with lightness and love we hold ourselves in God's care.

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. This beatitude is about the humble mourning of loved ones but also the humble mourning alongside all who mourn. The beatitudes are not just about our own personal relationship with but how we are connected in larger ways to the grief of the world and the even creation itself of whom Paul says in Romans 8:18-22 "For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for creation itself will be set free from its bondage and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now."

Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. Meekness does not mean being a door mat. Rather to be meek means to realize that we do not need to get the better of others or to lord possessions or position over others. It realizes strength in voluntary weakness. The strongest agents of social change in the world were Christians who were meek: Mother Teresa in Calcutta, India, Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa and Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador. The promise of this beatitude is

that the path of meekness is the path by which the last become first and thereby lead whole communities in paths of active obedience to God.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled. Again this beatitudes is meant as a corporate discipline, not as individual piety. Matthew is referring to God's saving righteousness as proclaimed by the prophets, God's vindication of the cause of the afflicted. Understood this way, the beatitude might be paraphrased, Blessed are those who yearn for the manifestation of God's saving righteousness. Again the International Children's Bible: Those who want to do right more than anything else are happy. This hungering after right to prevail in our community is the beginning of the work of God. God undergirds our desire for rightness in the world.

Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. Mercy embraces both compassion and forgiveness. It is more of a behaviour than an attitude. It remembers that God has first shown us mercy, compassion and forgiveness and we are dependent on those gifts. This beatitude reminds us to lavish the gifts of compassion and forgiveness on the backbiting people with whom we may have to work with or are related to. Presumably that would include also the person we face in the mirror each morning and evening!

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. The Old Testament background to this verse is likely Psalm 24:4-5. Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord. Again, Matthew's beatitudes emphasize the inward disposition of a person that leads to changed behaviour. Purity of heart cannot be

achieved without God's help. Arrogance, self-centredness and hard-heartedness poison the heart. The pure in heart are those who consistently and repeatedly allow God to cleanse them of bad attitude.

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

Matthew draws a distinction between charity and true servanthood. Peacemakers build bridges while others are constructing walls; they strive to love their enemies and return good for evil. This kind of peacemaking is far more riskier than that of writing cheques or collections canned goods, important as those charitable activities are. This kind of peacemaking involves the risk that values might be challenged and relationships forged between groups that have nothing in common. But the love of Christ and commitment to being his body on earth together makes us children of God and we celebrate this reality this morning in communion.

Blessed are you when people 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. Living the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount means embracing humility and voluntary simplicity, finding a way to love enemies and non-retaliation and a fearless, carefree attitude toward life based on confidence in God's care. This lifestyle is counter-cultural. It has been so in every age and it will engender misunderstanding at best and persecution at worst. It claims values that are different from others. It sometimes pits us against friends, family and neighbours. But we have to claim our humility with a little humility. It is God who calls us to live in the way of the beatitudes - not our own ethical elitism.

In this season of Mennonite Central Committee stories - there is a funny story of Mennonite Central Committee workers in Bangladesh who vied to see who could live the most impoverished, self-denying lifestyle - who could live on a cup of rice a day. They were so proud of their humility that their deprivation endangered their health. The beatitudes ask how we can live more joyfully, more peace ability, more freely and more spiritually - not how can we deprive ourselves to show how disciplined we are. The beatitudes again are not about ethical elitism but living more of how God wants us to be: blessed, happy, at peace within ourselves, our homes and our neighbourhoods as a collective effort.

May God our Creator, Jesus our Redeemer and the Holy Spirit our Guide grant us this blessedness as we commune together in bread and cup - the symbols of the life and gift of Christ to us with his life. For these gifts we give thanks and they are for all who love Christ and want to walk in the path of the beatitudes. We will serve gluten-free bread and grape juice in the pews. Please hold the gifts until we all eat together. I invite the deacons forward to serve. Let us pray:

Generous God, you desire our lives lived more fully and more joyfully in you. Stir us to vulnerability and trust and letting go of what we think we need in order to grow more deeply towards you and towards each other. Amen.