

The Wisdom of the Galilean

Matthew 5.1-12
(The Scholars Version)

February 6, 2011

The Beatitudes entered my conscious world at around the age of ten. The next fifty years of Beatitude awareness only increased the shock of these sayings of Jesus. While I longed for these ideals in the world, I now realize their call for revolution within my own soul. Now I'm shocked indeed.

- Suzanne Guthrie

The Beatitudes, or "blessings" of the Sermon on the mount turned the world upside down...

- Robin R. Meyers (adapted for worship)

Taking note of the crowds, he climbed up the mountain, and when he had sat down, his disciples came to him. He then began to speak, and this is what he would teach them: Congratulations to the poor in spirit! Heaven's domain belongs to them. Congratulations to those who grieve! They will be consoled. Congratulations to the gentle! They will inherit the earth. Congratulations to those who hunger and thirst for justice! They will have a feast. Congratulations to the merciful! They will receive mercy. Congratulations to those with undefiled hearts! They will see God. Congratulations to those who work for peace! They will be known as God's children. Congratulations to those who have suffered persecution for the sake of justice! Heaven's domain belongs to them. "Congratulations to you when they denounce you and persecute you and spread malicious gossip about you because of me. Rejoice and be glad! Your compensation is great in heaven. Recall that this is how they persecuted the prophets that preceded you."

The Beatitudes of Jesus rank very high among the scriptures that are most familiar, yet least understood. When we began our meditations on the Beatitudes last week we noted the difficulties we have understanding them. We don't hear them the way they were intended to be heard, we don't grasp their meaning, and therefore they have very limited impact on our daily lives. They are now routinely neglected, and have become what I call forgotten words; words at once familiar yet remote. This accounts for the simplicity of purpose with which we approach the Beatitudes. That is to say, we simply want to hear the authentic voice of Jesus

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through these central teachings, and unleash their power and profundity in our lives. As we turn again to the Beatitudes, however, I need to sound a word of caution. If there is any truth to the perspectives expressed in our worship headings, we should tread carefully in the vicinity of the Beatitudes, because Jesus' clear intention is to challenge and change us, to turn our world on its head and transform us completely from the inside out. A revolution, a personal spiritual revolution is what Jesus calls for in these heretofore forgotten words.

Last week we began the search for reasons behind our misunderstanding, neglect, and even abuse of the Beatitudes. We tend to hear them, I suggested firstly, as commands from Jesus to be obeyed on our own recognizance. This is ruled out by the Beatitudes that commend poverty, grief, and powerlessness. Surely Jesus is not suggesting we seek poverty, loss, and all manner of difficulties in life. Surely Jesus' congratulations to the poor is not another way of sending them out in search of poverty.

I am convinced that, far from issuing commands, Jesus is painting a portrait in the Beatitudes. He's sketching life as it is in the Kingdom of God and inviting us to be a part of that life. Please note that this is quite different from issuing a command, because the long and short of the Beatitudes is that we can't get there from here. No matter how hard we try, we cannot under our own initiative mold our lives to the dictates of the Beatitudes. We can't simply obey the Beatitudes as commandments because they represent life in the kingdom, and presence in the Kingdom is by invitation only. The Kingdom is ours only as a gift of grace; only as we humble ourselves before the greatness of God and accept by faith God's transforming rule in our lives.

Perhaps this is why Matthew began his version of the Beatitudes with congratulations to the poor in spirit, because this is precisely what poor in spirit means; being humble before the greatness of God and receiving all that we have – indeed all that we are – as the gift of grace. Thus, the beginning of faithfulness to the Beatitude lies in realizing that the transformation God wants to effect in our lives is a transformation of which God will be a part, and that the vision of life in the Kingdom, which can be ours, will not become reality without God weaving divine grace and courage into our lives again and again.

Hearing the Beatitudes as commands represents perhaps their most prevalent misunderstanding, but there are other reasons they have been neglected and abused. I would

like to look for additional reasons today. A second significant source of misunderstanding lies in approaching the Beatitudes as a model for personal piety and righteousness. That is to say, they address my personal spiritual life; they pronounce on my personal relationship with God... not my neighbor. The traditional translation of "Blessed" contributes to this misunderstanding. We tend to think of blessed as an emotional state or spiritual attitude. The blessed are usually visualized as calm, serene, patient, and kind... and often sporting a halo. Their blessed state is defined by their intimate relationship with God, not by what they do.

The Beatitudes, however, focus clearly on what the blessed *do*; moreover, on what they do for their neighbor, what they do for the other, the least of these, the down and out, the despised, the oppressed, the rejected. Jesus offers congratulations to those who humbly seek justice, not those who pray in public worship. Jesus offers congratulations to those who actively seek peace, not those who fast once a week and pat themselves on the back for doing so.

As a sketch of life in God's Kingdom, the Beatitudes address life in *relationship*; with God, of course, but also with our neighbors. The Beatitudes, in other words, are about community; the beloved community in which lives are woven together in mutual support, care, and fellowship. Life in the Kingdom as sketched in the Beatitudes is not simply about my personal relationship with God, but about my willingness to reach outside of myself and work for Justice. And as a sketch of life in God's Kingdom, the Beatitudes address spirituality as *action*. Notice that Jesus does not congratulate those who love peace. We all love peace; we yearn for peace; we pray for peace. Jesus congratulates those who work for peace, those who find ways to reconcile, to overcome estrangements, to tear down walls of separation, to bridge the distance between people, both on the individual and social level. Jesus' congratulations go to those who work for peace, who actually do peace in their lives.

The Beatitudes don't exclusively address our personal relationship with God through the Christ, but as well the dimension of justice to which we are time and again called. This call began with the Prophets, and came to a fevered pitch in the life and teaching of Jesus. How do we avoid this call? Quite simply, by neglecting or ignoring the Jesus of justice. We manage to misunderstand the Beatitudes by reading them through the lens of a different Jesus altogether. Once we realize that Jesus calls us not to think about peace but to do peace; once we realize

that Jesus calls us to be gentle and compassionate in the way we deal with others; once we realize that the values espoused in the Kingdom run counter to the values commended to us in our society - turning power on its head, and seeking cooperation and fellowship rather than manipulation and control; once we realize the *challenge* of the Beatitudes, the easiest thing to do is ignore this Jesus and listen to another one. But life in the Kingdom as sketched by Jesus in the Beatitudes *is* the authentic Jesus. Thus, we can't ignore the Jesus of the Beatitudes without ignoring God's vision of the Kingdom.

To approach the Beatitudes as commands is to misunderstand them. To take them as a model for personal piety and not justice is to misunderstand them, and this misunderstanding often leads to neglect. To approach the Beatitudes as a profile of a blessed nature is to misunderstand them. They challenge us not to *be* Christians but to *follow* the wisdom of the Galilean; to do justice, to make peace. We are not called to present a pious aura to those we meet; we are called to live faith, to do faith, to be faithful people of action.

There are any number of reasons that the Beatitudes have become forgotten words; any number of reasons they are familiar yet remote. They offer us an authentic sketch of life in the Kingdom, and this brings us back to our starting point. The vision of God's Kingdom will remain only that, a vision or dream, until we lower our resistance to God; give God free reign in our hearts and lives; and allow God to move us beyond our personal concerns to be people of gentleness and compassion, people who hunger and thirst for justice in our world. The vision of God's Kingdom will remain only that, a vision or dream, until we humble ourselves before the greatness of God and depend upon God's grace.

Such is Jesus' vision of life in the Kingdom; not a kingdom out there somewhere but God's Kingdom as it becomes real in our lives one day at a time, one step at a time. While I am confident that Jesus isn't describing our current life in the Beatitudes, I am confident as well that we can become Beatitude people as we accept their challenge, allow God free reign in our hearts and lives, and take those steps with God toward peace and justice, gentleness and compassion. And as we do, all along the way, God will say to us, congratulations, congratulations, congratulations.