

Blessed Are the Upside Down
Matthew 5:1-12
First Presbyterian Church
September 12, 2021

Prayer for Illumination

God, source of all light,
by your Word you give light to the soul.
Pour out upon us
the spirit of wisdom and understanding
that, being taught by you in Holy Scripture,
our hearts and minds may be opened to know the things
that pertain to life and holiness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Hebrew Bible Reading

⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Introduction to the Gospel Reading

Last week your preacher preached about preaching... this week we begin a series of sermons on a sermon. Now, most scholars agree that Jesus did not preach this entire three-chapter Sermon on the Mount in one sitting... (which as you know was how rabbis preached – sitting down). And in fact, this is probably not a sermon at all – but a series of discrete teachings or lessons. Which is good because as Clarence Jordan once said, “A sermon is something you sleep through and tell the preacher you really enjoyed,” but a lesson is different. ¹ So, the Sermon on the Mount is probably not a sermon but is more like a collection of lessons or instructions which - taken together - amount to “The Rabbi Jesus’s Greatest Hits.”²

I think Tom Long helps us understand the Beatitudes by likening them to the preamble of the U.S. Constitution. With an economy of words: “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union...” with an economy of words, this introductory statement defines the nation’s vision for itself... it expresses what kind of people we aspire to be.

¹ Clarence Jordan in *The Substance of Faith and Other Cotton Patch Sermons*, Association Press – 1972, p. 62.

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven* (Abingdon, 2020), p.xi

Tom Long suggests that the Sermon on the Mount is the “constitution of the church of Jesus Christ,” and the Beatitudes are its “preamble.” That the Beatitudes proclaim what is, in the light of the kingdom of heaven that has come near in the person Jesus, these brief words affirm what is unassailably true.

Matthew 5:3-12 (UNISON)

⁵When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them...

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon

In one of her sermons, Barbara Brown Taylor tells how when she was little, she liked to stand on her head. She was a short child, and everything in the world seemed so tall and boring to her... but she found that by standing on her head she could liven things up. Grass hung in front of her eyes like a green fringe... trees grew down not up... the sky was a blue lawn that went on forever. Her swing set was no longer an “A” but a “V” - and at any moment her house seemed in danger of falling off the yard. She liked standing on her head because she could see things in a new way... and even more because in a world where trees grew down and houses might fall up, anything seemed possible.

She suggests that perhaps Jesus should have asked his disciples to stand on their heads while he taught them these Beatitudes... because that's exactly what he did – he turned the world as they knew it upside down.³ Up was now down and down was now up. Out was now in and in was now out. Front was now back and back was now front. Blessed are the upside down.

You see, as followers of Jesus we see life through two frames of reference. First, we see what everybody else sees – the world of human history... we see a world where might makes right and to the victor go the spoils... we see a world that pronounces the benediction over the wealthy and powerful... over the self-assured and self-sufficient... over the strong and the assertive.

That's the first frame of reference – we see what everybody else sees – but those who follow Jesus also have a second frame of reference... we see what others do not see – and what we see through this second frame is a flat reversal ... that within kingdom of heaven the people the world pities and thinks of as losers, are the very people Jesus says are close to the heart of God... where true blessing and joy are to be found – close to the heart of God. God is at work in this world and will surely (in God's own time) bring all creation to a time of peace and rejoicing. This hoped-for time is the kingdom of heaven... and what Jesus is saying in these first twelve verses of Matthew 5 is that for the world, this kingdom will eventually come... yet, for those who are close to God's heart, this kingdom is already here. For the world it is "not yet" ... for the "blessed ones" it is "already."⁴

I don't know about you, but the real challenge - for me at least – is actually "seeing" life through this second frame. It's one thing for me to understand intellectually that there is a second frame... I can do that... but actually seeing what "upside down" blessedness looks like is a challenge for me.

I don't know if I should admit this or not, but I like to watch crime shows – and especially those shows in which someone or some team "profiles" the bad guys. They look at the evidence for clues and then they use what they have learned about people and at some point in the show, they gather everyone together and "deliver the profile." Well, Scott Hoezee teaches at Calvin Theological Seminary... and in a reflection on the Beatitudes he offers a "profile" of sorts of what a "Beatitude-filled" person might look like. "Suppose you could combine the personality traits and behaviors of the Beatitudes and put them all into one person," Hoezee writes, "What will **Mr. or Ms. Beatitude** look like? Well, he will be consistently kind and compassionate... always quick to lend a hand to anyone in need... yet he may shun the limelight – preferring to work behind the scenes.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon "Blessed are the Upside Down," *Gospel Medicine* (Cowley Publications – 1995), p. 145-146.

⁴ This reflection on the two frames of reference is based on Tom Long's commentary on Matthew, *Westminster Bible Companion* (WJK, 1997), p. 47-48.

She will always downplay her own actions, claiming they were never enough to meet the need and so, we might conclude she has a bad self-image. Life has taught him his limitations... he knows what the end of his own rope looks like... yet also knows that God will catch him when he gets there. She knows a thing or two about the losses of this life, so, she takes it very hard when she hears the news about a three-year old killed in his bed while sleeping, or the rising temperature on our planet, or that her next-door neighbor's beloved father has died. He is transparently faithful... genuinely good... her integrity is unquestioned... even when no one is looking. Because her heart is so centered on God, everything she says... everything she does... seems like an offering. He knows what it feels like to carry guilt and then to be forgiven, and always tries to forgive – as hard as that can be with some people. She's perpetually restless and concerned with many things in her life and in the world, yet trusts that God is at work even when she cannot see it. Mr. Beatitude might not always be the life of the party – as often as not, he will have a serious look on his face... or even a tear in his eye... and sometimes Ms. Beatitude might even seem like a troublemaker... with all her restless talk about doing what's right and fair and honest... and making things better for those everyone else seems to have forgotten about. You see, Mr. or Ms. Beatitude may not have all the things the world says you need to be happy... to know you're blessed... So, they need to be reminded – with some frequency – about the time Jesus went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him... and inviting them to stand on their heads, he began to speak, and he taught them...

“Blessed are you...”⁵

Who are poor in spirit

Who mourn

Who are meek and hunger and thirst for righteousness

Who are merciful and pure in heart,

Who are peacemakers and are persecuted for doing what is right.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

Charge

I spoke earlier about how we look at life through two different frames of reference – the right-side-up world with our feet planted solidly on the ground and the upside-down world with our feet planted firmly in the kingdom of heaven. I have often wrestled with the question of which one of those worlds is the real world? Is the world, which we think we are looking at right-side-up the real world? That's what we tend to say, isn't it? Or is Jesus showing us the real world through these “teachings on the mount?” Is he showing us the world that he sees... and that we can see if we but stand on our heads for a while... if we but plant our feet in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ Adapted from the reflections of Scott Hoezee, Center for Excellence in Preaching, in his Sermon Starters commentary on Epiphany 4A, January 23, 2017.