

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

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (justice!), for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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. **Matthew 5:1-12***

Blessed are the poor, the grieving, the meek? Really? Says who?

Well, says Jesus, at least according to this little collection of sayings before us this morning. These 8 or 9 statements — actually, I count 10, when we include that last crucial command: rejoice! -- so these 10 statements are often referred to as the beatitudes. And they seem pretty modest on the surface. But, they have been called, “the hope and prayer and vision of Jesus, the blueprint for Christian discipleship, the job description of every person of faith.” This, according to priest and renowned peacemaker Fr. John Dear in his fabulous book of meditations, *The Beatitudes of Peace*. So what was I thinking when I said “sure!” to trying to make sense of this, on this particular Sunday?

Probably I was just excited that Pastor Gusti wanted to accompany our youth this weekend. For the second year, they are working with The Center in Baltimore, which offers social-justice based programs for mission engagement designed to “send participants home with a renewed sense of call, energized to effect change in their own communities.” Who wouldn’t want to support that?

One of the *many* challenges in approaching a text like this one is simply that most of us have heard it a gazillion times. We’ve probably also heard more than a few glib misrepresentations. So, for me, at least, the beatitudes had become something like wall paper—really flowery wall paper, like a sappy, muzak version of a great rock song. Because, these familiar words of Jesus are actually *not* some cozy devotional discourse; they are, rather, a radical call to action and prayer.

In Matthew’s narrative, Jesus has just called his disciples, they follow him all around Galilee as he teaches and preaches and heals all kinds of people. Great crowds begin to follow. And its then, according to Matthew, that Jesus goes up the mountain with his disciples, sits down and begins to teach. With those words, Matthew’s Jewish audience, just sat up straight and perked up their ears, because now, we’re talking Moses. Jesus, a new Moses, goes up the mountain to reveal to his followers something more about their call.

These beatitudes are part of this whole larger discourse, often called the “Sermon on the Mount.” Less a sermon, its more a collection of sayings connected to Jesus, that Matthew

has compiled together here. So what we are actually dealing with is a distillation, a super-concentration of Jesus wisdom—and this is powerful stuff. Dangerous. Transformative wisdom. Maybe actually worth spending some time with.

This was the response, anyway, of one “ordinary” Indian lawyer, who first encountered this particular Jesus wisdom early in his career. These words, he would later say, went straight to his heart. This “beatitude experience” inspired his life-long, daily practice of prayer and meditation that included reading these verses, morning and evening. It was a practice that helped transform that lawyer Mohandas into universal wisdom figure Mahatma Gandhi. It shaped his vision of nonviolent social change, which helped transform all of India, and I believe, continues to transform the world. Gandhi’s work and witness inspired people the world over, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Just think how much his vision of nonviolence, justice, and social change continues to inspire and influence us. This is powerful stuff. It did get every one of them killed.

No wonder we dilute it with sentimentality. And the words alone are a challenge, starting with that first one: blessed. It has such a different connotation for us than it would have for Jesus and his followers. “Have a blessed day!” meaning happy, secure, comfy. And how about: “bless your heart”? doesn’t that often mean the actual opposite? Don’t get me wrong, I’m a big fan of blessing and being blessed, of noticing and receiving the beauty and goodness and grace in our lives, so that we can in turn offer it more fully and freely to the world. I just don’t think that fully captures what Jesus is up to here.

In biblical terms, “blessed” implies this fullness and abundance of existence, one that occurs when we are fully aligned with the Divine. Very often, even in scripture, that blessedness is described as conditional. Blessed are you if you do all the right things, follow all the rules, keep all the commandments perfectly; then, you will be rewarded with bounty.

Jesus upends this whole scheme. Beatitude blessedness is not about us at all, it has nothing to do with our efforts, and cannot be measured in material terms. This blessedness is all about God; God’s presence and power, God’s infinite desire for healing and wholeness, God’s alignment with and in all who are humble, compassionate, peaceful, all who suffer and grieve, and all who hunger with God for justice. *This* is the source of unspeakable joy. God, present and acting in all manner of things, especially where humility and poverty, suffering and grief crack us open to receive what is always already there. We cannot earn God’s grace, but we can align ourselves with all those places of God’s preference, in our lives and in our world.

Bryan Stevenson is another “ordinary” lawyer, who we have been talking about in our Sunday Seminars on race and racism. He tells in his book *Just Mercy* the story of his very first visit to death row as a young law student. He’d been sent to meet an inmate named Henry, who like so many, had been labeled, locked up and forgotten. Stevenson shows up, really nervous, painfully aware that he has literally nothing to offer this man beyond his presence and the assurance that his execution date will not happen in the next year. Henry’s gratitude is overwhelming. The two begin to talk, and connect, and share their lives. Three hours pass before a very angry guard appears. As he violently rushes Henry out of the room, Henry turns to Stevenson with his own litany of assurance: don’t worry Bryan, don’t worry it’s OK, he keeps repeating. And before the guard can shove him entirely out the door, Henry closes his eyes, throws back his head...and begins to sing: “I’m pressing on, the upward way, new heights I’m gaining every day, still praying as, I’m onward bound. Lord, plant my feet on Higher Ground.” That hymn, one that

Stevenson also knew by heart, echoed all the way down the long prison corridor; as the guard pushed and shoved, Henry sang.

“I sat down completely stunned,” Stevenson writes. “Henry’s voice was filled with desire. I experienced his song as a precious gift...I didn’t expect him to be compassionate or generous. I had no right to expect anything from a condemned man on death row. Yet he gave me an astonishing measure of his humanity. In that moment, Henry altered something in my understanding of human potential, redemption and hopefulness.”

Isn’t *this* just the kind of upside-down blessing that Jesus is trying to describe? Assurance – not that everything will be OK, but the promise that God is present and acting, even in the most difficult circumstances. An invitation to participate in God’s kingdom coming, that empire of justice, peace, and goodness for all. Its a call to hope, and to joy, in spite of all the evidence.

From the seeds of this encounter with Henry and other death row inmates, Stevenson’s Equal Justice Initiative was born. Located in Montgomery Alabama, EJI continues Dr. King’s ministry for justice in its pursuit of criminal justice reform. And in his work, Stevenson has drawn a straight bright line between our current system of racially motivated mass incarceration and state sanctioned execution, and our nation’s unspeakable history of racial oppression, slavery and lynching. So, in addition to its work on death row, EJI has launched a powerful and innovative nationwide movement of truth telling specifically around our history of racial terror lynchings. This history of unimaginable cruelty continues to haunt us all, Stevenson says, because we refuse to remember it. Unless and until we can tell the truth, the whole truth, we cannot grieve, lament, repent and without that, none of us can ever be free.

“The true measure of our character,” writes Stevenson, “is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated and the condemned. We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation...we all need mercy, we all need justice, and we all need some measure of unmerited grace.”

Blessed are the poor, the grieving, the persecuted, and yes, the incarcerated and condemned. Honestly, it still doesn’t sound quite right to me. Commentators have offered all kinds of alternative translations (believe me, I searched!) – “happy”? -- seems worse. Honored. Favored. Beloved. Aligned. My personal favorite, at least today, comes from a scholar working in Aramaic, the language of Jesus that lies underneath the Greek. He suggests that the “blessed are” construct is way too passive, that a more accurate translation would actually sound more like: “Arise, stand up, walk forth.”

As Father Dear puts it:

Arise and walk forth you poor, humble, oppressed and powerless. The kingdom of God is yours! Keep on going; don’t be discouraged by your poverty or powerlessness. Arise and walk forth, you who mourn, you will be comforted! Keep on going; grieve, but keep organizing, seeking justice and making peace...arise and walk forth, you who hunger and thirst for justice. You will be satisfied! Keep going; don’t give up the nonviolent struggle for justice. Arise and walk forth, you who are merciful to everyone. You will receive mercy! Keep on going; be instruments of mercy in a merciless world...You will experience the mercy of God.

Now more than ever may this be so, in our world, our nation, our community, our lives,  
and our hearts. Amen

*The Beatitudes of Peace: Meditations on the Beatitudes, Peacemaking and the Spiritual Life* By  
John Dear. Twenty Third Publications. 2016