

Meditative Reflections on the Beatitudes  
(Matt5:1-12, Micah6:1-8, 1Cor1:18-31) 2Feb2020

*Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up the mountain and gathered his followers around him<sup>1</sup>, and he opened his mouth, teaching and saying to them, “Privileged<sup>2</sup> are the dispirited<sup>3</sup>, because they are part of God’s sort of<sup>4</sup> empire<sup>5</sup>.”*

Jesus had the good sense to give these pithy thoughts and not blather on. But I’m non-sensical to add words. I’m also without enough common sense to leave alone what may be some of your favorite words and have re-translated them<sup>6</sup>.

You are familiar with Beatitudes as Blessed are those. Or maybe happy.

I said “privileged.” Though we may pursue happiness, and may have foggy notions of blessing, privilege offers clarity that this isn’t something you do. It’s fortunate that that’s who you are, like concepts of “white privilege” (though incidentally, given his other examples, Jesus would likely counter and say “Privileged are the black, the people of color.”) Privilege means a special benefit that you didn’t earn.

In this first unexpected declaration, as we start our worship service, Jesus says it’s a privilege to be dispirited, to be hopeless. If you imagine that strong faith is a prerequisite for gathering here, for coming to church, or being connected to God, Jesus says you’re better off if it seems like everything goes wrong, like there’s no point, like you don’t want to continue on. You’re all set for where God’s work happens.

*“Privileged are the saddened, because they are to be encouraged.”*

“Rejoice and be glad?” That refrain (“Blest Are They,” ELW 728) particularly seems not to square with sadness, this Beatitude’s blessing of those who mourn. Clearly it doesn’t work to say

that if you’re sorrowful, then you should get happy, or be glad to be sad. When you’re down, I’m sure not telling you to buck up.

But this may re-attune you to the source of strength. Jesus proclaims privilege that he will be with you—including in this community—to comfort, to encourage. In time of need, you may know the one offering relief, comfort, strength, blessing, and yes, also joy; Lord, have mercy. Kyrie eleison.

*“Privileged are the nonviolent<sup>7</sup>, because their way will<sup>8</sup> control this world.<sup>9</sup>”*

Moving from a song sung by angels at the birth of a helpless outcast baby Jesus (“Gloria in excelsis”), we hear this next Beatitude, about a way that appears weak. This word is translated throughout the Bible in different ways: downtrodden, humble, oppressed, lowly, poor, broken-hearted, afflicted. The typical here is “blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

Those who have been tromped under foot somehow coming out on top is a strong word of reversal, of God’s restorative justice.

But Jesus says still more in the Sermon on the Mount. The choices aren’t just violent control that harms or passive submission that gets hurt. He commends nonviolent resistance, a way picked up by Gandhi, a practice embodied by civil rights protestors who were spit on and arrested and sprayed with fire hoses. They were getting hurt. They were oppressed. They were trodden down. But their way, Jesus says, is mightier than the sword, stronger than empire, destined to win, to be the way of the future, the way of God, the way for life in this world.

*“Privileged are those hungering and thirsting for justice<sup>10</sup>, because their appetites are to be quenched.”*

<sup>1</sup> skipping “sit to teach” for modern context

<sup>2</sup> see Kittel v4p365, trying for familiar modern term

<sup>3</sup> depressed? down-hearted? not-very-spiritual? for-whom-things-aren’t-going-great?

<sup>4</sup> avoiding “heaven” as location for the empire

<sup>5</sup> clearer sense of conflict/confrontation and contemporary emphasis than “kingdom”

<sup>6</sup> adapted from 2017 version

<sup>7</sup> see <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/epiphany4a/>

<sup>8</sup> “are to/they’ll” emphasizing future passive

<sup>9</sup> heir → responsibility, share of, take possession of; *gan* as land, nation, earth (non-heaven)

<sup>10</sup> more familiar than “righteousness”

You may know hunger that won't be satisfied with the persistent wrongs of the world. You may yearn for things to be set things right. To make it as we know it should be, as we want them to be, practically able to taste how it could be.

The prophet Micah orients this to our relationship with God in that beloved answer to the question, "What is required of you? Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God."

With Jesus, we would not take it as an instruction. Again, the Beatitudes aren't telling us what to do. They are stating our reality. Here, justice isn't something to have to do. It's what you may be hungering for, starving, aching, with an appetite that can't be quenched. Except by God.

*"Privileged are the helpers, because they'll be helped<sup>11</sup>."*

Or blessed are the merciful.

I know mercy can seem condescending. Like I'd have the ability to smush you, to punish you, to be cruel and instead I don't. Of course, we don't like the idea of a cruel, punishing God.

But if we'd have the concept of a God of power, a God on high, a God who would have the ability to smush you, the Beatitudes are set against that. God is with the downtrodden, not those trodding down.

The same word used in the Beatitudes was in Micah: love kindness. Love mercy. Love helping. God is recognized not in smiting or barely restraining a raised fist. God is in kindness, assistance, shared struggle.

In another way, that is also in the amazing passage from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. God chose what is foolish and weak, what is despised. God chose the nonviolent way, in order to disprove power, the ways we think we have it all figured out. There's plenty that's high and mighty and self-assured and holier-than-thou and claiming to be right and trying to get ahead, to win.

But we proclaim Christ crucified.

*"Privileged are those with clean hearts<sup>12</sup>, because they'll recognize God."*

We keep trying to get to God. Micah said it's not burnt offering or sacrifice. Paul proclaimed it wasn't wisdom or signs. We try to pretty ourselves up, to be holy, to think that gets us closer. We go stumbling off in all the wrong directions for God, deciding we need to clean ourselves up and wanting to look good.

We don't often choose to dwell in dusty, ugly corners, where we'd be with the cross, the one who is down in the dumps, the suffering one caught underfoot.

Create in me a clean heart, O God. The prayer from Psalm 51, echoed in this Beatitude, is not something you get to do, and you may not even have chosen to, have wanted to. You couldn't scrub your heart. The Holy Spirit poured into you is what reveals God, a God you recognize in the surprises and low moments and with you in ways you would never have prepared for.

*"Privileged are the peacemakers, because God will call them son—daughter: child<sup>13</sup>."*

This has been one of my favorite verses in the whole Bible. I connect it to that nonviolence mentioned earlier and anti-militarism, the new way from Jesus.

There's also some tough work of reconciliation in this. In times of conflict, it would be easier to go with fight or flight than to seek understanding, to maintain relationships.

But for this, the Beatitude reflects a first relationship. This is language that matches the baptism of Jesus, when God's voice announced "this is my beloved Son." This voice echoes in your baptism: you are a child of God and God loves you. It is your calling, how you're called.

This first relationship sets everything else right, for total wholeness. For shalom. For salaam. It makes peace. Dona nobis pacem.

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<sup>11</sup> trying for paired terms around *eleamon* (gracious/graced)

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<sup>12</sup> Psalm 51 :10

<sup>13</sup> baptismal calling

*“Privileged are those hunted<sup>14</sup> [on account of] justice, because they are part of God’s sort of empire.”*

You might notice that we close out the Beatitudes in the way we began: being part of God’s sort of empire.

It reminds us that being on God’s side, following God’s will, being blessed, isn’t about things going along as a piece of cake in the way you might wish. This says you can be doing right, can be aching for God’s justice, can be trying to help the world square with God’s vision and be the sort of place the reveals the presence of God, and still you’re likely to get hurt for it. Even hunted down. Persecuted.

Jesus isn’t telling you that having people out to get you is great, is what you’re after, is the point of this faith. Persecution isn’t the privilege. But Jesus does realize that living in God’s sort of empire is going to put you at odds with other empire, with the political powers, with economic clout, with cultural definitions, with self-seeking.

It’s no fun to give up your Saturdays to be striving for justice. It’s no fun to wake up early to serve Porchlight breakfast. It’s no fun to protest. It’s no great joy to be with people who are down.

...Actually, that’s a lie. There’s plenty of fun in all those things! They may just not have the immediate appeal of other choices, of typical time-users, of normal life that isn’t seeking first God’s sort of empire.

For some, coming to church on Sunday morning to be here with the rest of the dispirited may be persecution enough, since living into this faith may involve arguments with your family or even in yourself about it. Jesus doesn’t say that’s a treat. But he commends that the struggle is worth it.

*“You’re privileged when you’re insulted and hunted and they give ‘fake news’<sup>15</sup> about you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because that*

*is earning God’s sort of wages<sup>16</sup>, just as that’s how they hunted the prophets before you.”*

The last Beatitude. Different from the rest. The rest speak about “those.” This one says, “you.” You are blessed. You are privileged. You may have heard it before in the others. This one says you will get what you deserve. You’ll have earned it.

Well, kinda. It’s still not you. It’s something you’re given. It’s a gift of the Holy Spirit. Receive God’s blessing:

“What is new in the Gospel is not so much that God is a Source of goodness, but that human beings can and should act in the image of their Creator:

“Be merciful, as your Father is merciful! Be children of God,” who are able to respond to evil with good, to hatred with love.

By living a universal compassion, by forgiving those who hurt us, witness that the God of mercy is present at the heart of the world, in our midst.

The presence in your hearts of divine love in person, the Holy Spirit, enables you to live in this way.”<sup>17</sup> **Amen**

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<sup>14</sup> more active of “sought/chased” and more familiar than “persecuted/oppressed”

<sup>15</sup> term currently in news from Trump, for “falsely say bad stuff”

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<sup>16</sup> not heavenly reversal, but active suffering for acting godly

<sup>17</sup> adapted from Taize, [https://www.taize.fr/en\\_article344.html](https://www.taize.fr/en_article344.html)