

FROM THE MOUNT, A SERMON

Matthew 5:1-12

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on January 29, 2017, the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

When I was a child in the Presbyterian Church, the only hymnbook I knew was affectionately called “The Red Hymnbook,” though its formal title was shorter – *The Hymnbook*. Many of you who were raised Presbyterian also sang from this hymnbook. What I specifically remember about it were portions of scripture printed in the back, which from time to time the minister would ask the congregation to stand and read. Most of the selections were psalms, usually read responsively, but the first selection from the New Testament was a reading of the Beatitudes – words of Jesus appearing in bright red letters which the congregation would recite in unison. In today’s service, the children have just sung a portion of the Beatitudes; the chancel choir will sing them later; hear them now as they appear in the translation of the Bible we use today.

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, 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.

As many of you know, the Beatitudes are the most famous of Jesus’ earliest teaching, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. Having endured forty days and nights of temptation in the wilderness, having called his disciples, Jesus ventures up an unnamed mountain, and assuming the posture of a rabbi, sits to teach. Just as Moses had delivered Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai generations earlier, Jesus delivers nine Beatitudes, speaking to disciples gathered around him and to a larger crowd fanning out from them.

I.

For centuries Christians have tried to figure out what to do with the Beatitudes, specifically, what their role and purpose is. They are so peaceful and passive

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...”

“Blessed are those who mourn...”

“Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers...”

I want to share with you a sampling of conversations I have had with people in or near our congregation in just the last few weeks that reveal the nature of the world in which we live, the world in which the Beatitudes face particular challenge:

- The consideration of having our children tested to see which pre-school they can enter, better yet what college they may attend
- A member who recently shared that he was awaiting word of the release of a new product to determine the next case he would likely litigate through his law firm
- The process of ending a lengthy marriage in which considerable personal and financial betrayal have occurred
- A member involved in a trial who has concern for the safety of witnesses who return home fearful of reprisals on the part of relatives and fellow gang members of the convicted who are also neighbors
- Members concerned about the battles going on in our political system – particularly the last 24 hours – to determine who shall be admitted to our nation and who shall not, what constitutes security and what threatens security, what is true to who we are and what is not, and what tools of executive order, legal appeal, legislation, public or official speech, media, and protest are utilized in this battle.

Through all such matters of personal life and statecraft we cannot help but ask of the Beatitudes:

- Are they commandments to follow in this life, or are they descriptions of the life to come?
- Do they constitute a moral code for the marketplace and the relations between nations, races, religions, or are they more indicative of what life is to be in the church, monastery, utopian religious community?
- Are the Beatitudes commandments or aspirations, the reflections of the way things are under God or the ways things ought to be, an aesthetic ideal for which we can pray but for which in reality we can only wait and hope?
- Are they a compendium of ethics concerning how we are to treat members of our family and friends, or are they a picture of how we are to construct the political and economic orders of the community, nation, world in which we live?

No one argues with the Beatitudes – except perhaps Machiavelli, Hobbes, Nietzsche – but most of us wonder if they are realistic. Thus, we ask, what role do they play in our faith and life?

II.

One aspect of the Beatitudes that may be helpful in answering this question is to acknowledge that while they are creative and idealistic, they emerge from and are embedded within a structure that is orderly, ongoing, and rooted in history. Like their predecessor the Ten Commandments, they arise at a particular time in the life of the people of God.

- You see, Moses delivered the Ten Commandments between the time the people of Israel had been freed from 400 years of slavery and the time they would enter the Promised Land, still forty years away with a wilderness experience in between. The people of Israel were in the earliest stages of being formed as a nation; they did not have a land or political leaders; the Ten Commandments are given to them as more or less a founding document, a set of principles that define who they are as they people of God. As creative and idealistic as they are – “You shall have no other gods before you; you shall not make false use of the name of the Lord your God; you shall not covet...” – the Ten Commandments arise within a structure, an order, a history, that help constitute an identity of a people,¹ the people of God.

¹ Exodus 20:1-17.

- The same is true of the Beatitudes. Like Moses, Jesus had been taken to Egypt for safety shortly after his birth;² after a period of youth and childhood of which we see very little, he has been baptized by John the Baptist;³ he has endured forty days and forty nights in the wilderness;⁴ he has called his first disciples;⁵ and he is ready to begin his public ministry. Just as the Ten Commandments establish identity for the people of Israel, the Beatitudes establish identity for those who follow Jesus within that people.

The Beatitudes speak to what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be the church. As we seek to embody them, we are stepping in to the Judeo-Christian heritage, the church, the people of God. As creative and challenging as they are, they are creative and challenging within an ordered history and structure.

III.

Second, to answer the question of time: “Are the Beatitudes a description of the *present* life of a Christian or of the *life to come*?” the answer is both.

Notice that the first part of each Beatitude is an *indicative* statement in the *present* tense:

- Blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...
- Blessed *are* the pure in heart...
- Blessed *are* you when people revile you and persecute you...

There is nothing in these Beatitudes that imply that their blessings are reserved for the life to come. “Blessed are you...” they say. “Blessed *are* you,” here and now.

But there is a *future* dimension to the second half of most of the beatitudes:

- Blessed are those who mourn, for they *will* be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they *will* inherit the earth.
- Blessed are the merciful, for they *will* receive mercy.

Clearly there is an element of promise to the Beatitudes. The fullness of blessing does not all happen in the present. Not all blessedness is present tense. The Beatitudes are harbingers of blessings to come as well.

IV.

To answer the question of scope, there is little sense in the New Testament that Jesus came simply to bring a new set of personal ethics concerning relationships with those with whom we are already close.

Just as Moses had delivered the Ten Commandments from *Mt. Sinai* in preparation for the people of Israel entering the Promised Land, Jesus not only delivers the Beatitudes from a *mountain* to begin his ministry, following his death and resurrection, he will commission his same disciples from another *mountain* “to go... and make disciples of all nations...”⁶ As the Gospel spreads following the death and resurrection of Jesus, its crucial and central teaching known as the Beatitudes is for *all* nations, *all* peoples, *all* times, not just for

² Matthew 2:13-23.

³ Matthew 3:13-17.

⁴ Matthew 4:1-11.

⁵ Matthew 4:18-22.

⁶ Matthew 28:16-20.

Christians in our family lives, churches, or religious orders. They are an embodiment of God's best and most loving will for all of humanity.

V.

So if the Beatitudes are both present and future and if their scope is unlimited by sphere of life, how can they function for us? How can they come to life in our lives?

To answer this question, let's first look at the meaning of the opening word of each Beatitude: "Blessed!"

"Blessed" goes way back into the Old Testament, and its essential meaning is "fortunate," "happy," indeed "blessed by God." To be blessed is to be instilled with trust and hope that is not tied to present circumstances.

Notice, in fact, that many of the circumstances in which Jesus pronounces blessing are trying:

- Poverty
- Poverty of spirit
- Mourning
- Meekness
- Conflict
- The absence of peace.

In addition, blessings are an aspect of what is called "performative" language. A blessing does not just describe or claim that God is with us in a given situation. A blessing actually brings God's presence to us in that situation.

- Have you ever been hospitalized and had someone pray for you?
- Have you ever come forward during a service of healing and been anointed with oil or simply touched and heard words of blessing?
- Have you ever had someone take your hand or place their arm around your shoulders and hear them give thanks to God on your behalf for the person with whom you have "walked and talked and kept sweet counsel" for twenty or forty or sixty years and from whom life has just been lifted in the bed next which you are standing?

The pronouncing of blessing in these situations is performative. It announces God's blessing, yes. It invokes God's blessing, yes. But it also brings God's blessing. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

VI.

Finally, when Beatitudes make their way into our lives bearing their blessing, they bring about a rare mixture of *solidity* and *song*. The word "blessed" appears in Psalm 40 in a way that points to this:

I waited patiently for the Lord;
He inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit...
And set my feet upon a *rock*,
Making my steps secure.⁷

⁷ Psalm 40;1-4.

Solidity.

He put a new *song* in my mouth,
A song of praise to our God.

Song.

Blessed are those
Who make the Lord their trust.

Blessing.

Blessing brings *solidity* and *song*, feet on solid ground, music coming traveling from our hearts to our lips.

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There is an example well known within the philosophy of language that illustrates the solidity and song of blessing. Language, writes J. L. Austin, is like the lamp on a miner's forehead.

- In the darkness of a mine, the lamp illumines the path ahead.
- As the miner moves forward and turns her head, the lamp illumines a different part of the path.
- The lamp allows the miner to feel along the walls, to see drop offs and impediments in the path ahead, to remain on solid ground, avoiding shafts and pools of water.
- With the lamp on the forehead, the miner finds his way through the darkness, on solid ground, one step at a time, to return each night, to home, to family, to warmth, to safety, to shower, to song.⁸

Solidity and song. That's what the Beatitudes provide. The miner's lamp.

Amen.

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⁸ J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, Second Edition, edited by J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 284-285. Thanks to Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg for this reference in *Bewildernments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), 278.