

Everything's Upside Down
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. William D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
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The Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 5:1-12

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down,

his disciples came to him.

2 Then he taught them, saying:

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.

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

The Sermon on the Plain
Luke 6:12 & 20-23

12 Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

21 "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

22 "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets."

The Sermon

The preamble to the United States Constitution states: “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America.”

This introductory statement defines the essence of the nation’s vision of itself and expresses the sort of citizenry it hopes to embody. In a similar manner, the sermon Jesus delivers to his disciples and, we can be certain, to the crowd which was pressing in as closely as possible to hear his words, is the “constitution” of the church of Jesus Christ, and the Beatitudes are its “preamble.”

Unlike the preamble to the U.S. constitution, however, it becomes quickly apparent that the Beatitudes turn the world’s values upside down. What is true for those who live in the power of the kingdom of heaven is a flat out reversal of what is considered to be true in the culture at large.

The values Jesus’ expressed concerning the kingdom of heaven are so opposite of the social values of most every culture in history, that Episcopal Priest Barbara Brown Taylor thinks Jesus should have begun his remarks by asking all his listeners to stand on their heads. As a little girl Ms. Taylor liked standing on her head. She writes,

By standing on my head, I could liven up my boring little world a bit. Grass hung in front of my eyes like a green fringe. Trees grew down, not up, and the sky was a blue lawn that went on forever. For as long as I could keep my balance I could tap dance on it, while birds and clouds flew under my feet. My swing set was not longer an “A” but a “V” and my house seemed in danger of falling off the yard -- just shooting off into space like a rocket.... I liked standing on my head because it made me see old things in a new way. I liked it because it made life seem exciting and unpredictable. In a world where trees grew down and houses might fall up, anything seemed possible.

So, she says, “I think Jesus should have asked the crowd to stand on their heads when he taught them the Beatitudes, because that was what he was doing. He was turning the known world upside down.”¹

Turning things upside down indeed.

- ▶ Those who had been fighting for breath at the bottom of the human heap suddenly found themselves closest to heaven.
- ▶ Those who thought they were on top of things found themselves flat on their backs looking up.

This topsy-turvy world did not suddenly exist because Jesus taught with the cadence of an African American preacher, saying, “Blessed are you;” “Blessed are you.” That style of expression was commonplace in the ancient world, and it was usually used to create sayings like you’d find in “Poor Richard’s Almanac.” You know, pithy little truths.

“Blessed are the wise, for they shall not be fooled.” “Blessed are the strong, for their enemies shall fear them.” Blessed are the wealthy, for they shall never go hungry.”

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*

Everyday truths about everyday life.

Another word for “blessed” in this wisdom formula is “happy.” The French translation is *debonair*. That has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? “Debonair are those who have invested well, for their old age shall be secure.”

But what must the disciples and the crowd have been thinking when Jesus started off on his list. Like good students they had their notebooks out and their pencils sharpened getting ready for the pearls of wisdom about to come from the Master. I wonder if anyone laughed, or coughed, or nudged their neighbor when Jesus got to his second or third blessing.

“Who’s he trying to kid?” they may well have been thinking. Blessed are the *meek*? The *mournful*? The *poor in spirit*? There was nothing *debonair* about any of those.

What was so happy about hungering and thirsting for righteousness, or about being reviled and persecuted? “Rejoice and be glad?!” No one with a lick of sense was going to vote for any of those definitions of the Good Life, but Jesus was not asking for anyone’s approval.

Jesus may have been reported to be a fun guy at weddings, and in the pub mixing it up with the locals. But this is no wedding, no night out. This is Rabbi Jesus, the God-ordained Messiah, sitting and teaching on the side of a mountain. This was Jesus letting his disciples know early and clearly that his understanding of God’s values differed radically even from what much of the Jewish wisdom literature set forth. No big barns and fat year-end bonuses for his followers.

Jesus’ message from the mountain differs as well from much that we can pick up at any Christian bookstore today -- books that tout Jesus as the greatest CEO who ever lived; Christianity as the guaranteed model for personal and financial success. Hardly, at least not through Jesus’ eyes.

Instead, Jesus defined the Good Life of the Kingdom in nine short sentences and held them out for everyone to see: nine portraits of kingdom people, previously known as victims, dreamers, pushovers, and fools. These are the chosen ones, he said, the blessed ones who shall see God face-to-face. These are the happy ones, the lucky ones, who shall be satisfied -- not because they got an advance copy of the rules and played by them to win, but because winning was the farthest thing from their minds.

Had a United States President given this speech, we can be certain that within minutes his staff would be rushing to every news bureau and talk show to begin the spin to correct the impression that the President was, indeed, promoting such foolish values and such foolish people.

But this wasn’t the president of the United States, this was Jesus of Nazareth. This isn’t the Wall Street Journal, this is the Gospel According to Matthew. And these words -- or similar ones -- are repeated in the Gospel According to Luke, only there they are even more scandalous. In Luke it is not simply the “poor in spirit” who will achieve the kingdom, it’s the flat-out economically poor. In Luke it is not simply those who hunger after righteousness, it’s the hungry, period.

These are society’s losers, make no mistake about it.

- These are the merciful who keep forgiving their enemies so their enemies can trounce them all over again.
- These are the pure in heart who believe everything they hear and empty their bank accounts to keep crooks in business.
- These are the peacemakers who step into the middle of a fist fight and get clobbered from both sides.

These are not the Olympians who win a race, then grab their nation's flag and run a victory lap soaking up the praise while their defeated opponents are back putting on their warmups and heading for the showers. These are the Special Olympians who -- true story -- are in the midst of a race when one of the contestants falls to the track and lies there crying. One by one the other contestants stop running, return to the fallen runner, help him up, and then join hands and finish the race in unison -- all winners -- no losers.

These are God's favorites, Jesus insists -- not the effective, successful people in the world but the ones who cannot even compete, who would not know success if it walked up and handed them a trophy. Such blessed ones would insist there must have been some mistake. The blessed ones would give the prize to someone they thought was more deserving, or who they thought needed it more. The blessed ones would put it in a closet so they would not be tempted to think too highly of themselves.

Most of us do not know what to do with the Beatitudes. Some of us have heard them for so long that they have lost their shock value for us. They just sound sort of sweet and familiar to us -- a Christian poem -- some-thing to needlepoint and hang over the piano.

Others of us hear them like new commandments and worry that we are not meek enough, pure enough, persecuted enough.

But notice please that there are no "shoulds" or "oughts" here, no "shalts" or "shalt nots." The language of the Beatitudes is not transactional language -- do this and you will receive that. Rather, it is descriptive language -- this is who these people are now, and this is what the future holds for them.

It is the language not of law, but of gospel, the language of hope and promise that the way things are now is not the way they will always be. It is language that promises that those who find themselves scorned and sitting in the back of coach class now, will be sitting in first class before the plane has reached its destination.

Today this same gospel lesson is being read and preached about around the world -- in a cinder block church in Kenya, where parishioners sit cross-legged on a packed dirt floor and where insects fly in and out through open windows. Today this gospel is being read and commented on in a shack on stilts in the wetlands of El Salvador, where the majority of those present must listen hard because they cannot read. Today this gospel is being read and commented on in multiple languages right here in the United States -- in Korean Presbyterian churches; in Chinese Presbyterian churches; in Spanish churches in barrios and in migrant work camps.

Much of the power of the Beatitudes depends on where you are sitting when you hear them. They sound different from on top than they do from underneath. They sound different from up front than they do from way in the back. They sound different to the religiously and economically satisfied and self-assured than they do to the spiritually, emotionally, physically, financially, and sexually beaten down and cast aside.

Where is our hunger and thirst, us well-fed Christians? Where is our spiritual poverty? Where are the bones of our souls showing through our clothes, and why aren't our handkerchiefs soaked with tears?

But for those present here today, and those within the hearing of this gospel worldwide, who are the victims, the dreamers, the pushovers, and the fools, the Beatitudes sound completely different. "Shhh," they say, "dry your tears, little ones. The whole earth belongs to you, though someone else still holds the keys. It won't be long now. Heaven's gates are opening wide for you, and the first face you shall see shall be the face of God.

So, people, maybe we should all be standing on our heads, because upside down, you begin to see God's blessed ones in places it would never have occurred to you to look. You begin to see that the poor in spirit, the meek and those who mourn are not just people you can help but people who can help you, if you will let them, and that their hunger and thirst for God are not voids to be filled but appetites to be envied.

Upside down you begin to see that the peacemakers are not flower children but physicians, prescribing God's own tranquility, and that the pure in heart have just never gotten the knack of locking their doors. Upside down, you begin to see that those who have been bruised for their faith are not the sad ones but the happy ones because they have found something worth being bruised for, and that those who are merciful are just handing out what they have already received in abundance.

Barbara Brown Taylor notes that "the world looks funny upside down, but maybe that is just how it looks when you have your feet planted in heaven. Jesus did it all the time and seemed to think we could do it too. So blessed are those who stand on their heads, for they shall see the world as God sees it. They shall also find themselves in good company, turned upside down by the only one who really knows which way is up.

Thanks be to God.