

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 30, 2011
Lessons: Isaiah 53:1-8 and Matthew 5:1-12

HOW BLESSED?

People mourning the death of a loved one do in many cases feel blessed, but not by the loss that grieves them. They feel blessed by the life and love they have shared, by all they were given in the relationship. But Jesus calls blessed people in conditions of life for which the world pities or else scorns them. Deliberately, he reverses our assessments of who is doing well in life and who poorly. We do not envy the people Jesus calls blessed. No one in his or her right mind would say to friend, "I hear you are in mourning. Congratulations on your loss." We offer our condolences, our sympathy, our friendship and support, because we know grief hurts deeply.

In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." In Luke's Sermon on the Plain¹, he says directly to the people, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Taking their cue from Matthew's "poor in spirit," some teachers of the Bible have spiritualized the whole list, making (for example) "those who mourn," no longer people who have suffered the death of a loved one or the destruction of their way of life or any other personally catastrophic loss, but rather those pious souls who are continuously grieved by the immorality and spiritual deadness of our world.

We must not so over-spiritualize the beatitudes that Jesus seems no longer to be speaking of the actually poor, the personally grieved, the truly humbled by life or humiliated by other people, the cheated, or the abused. We must not push aside the victims of the world's many cruelties and deprivations. It is not authentic to grieve spiritually in isolation from the people suffering the actual loss, and such isolation is not simply a matter of physical distance. As the biblical Job discovers, a would-be comforter can be physically present but still quite distant emotionally and so of very little comfort. The bridge between the one who suffers and the other who cares is empathy² which is the emotional ability to understand to some degree and feel a little the sufferings of another person, to resonate with the feelings of another. Over-spiritualizing the beatitudes enables the spiritual to step back so far from the people suffering poverty, grief, and humiliation that the victims are forgotten or maybe even blamed. Religious declarations about social issues sometimes seem more focused on the imperfections of life in our world than moved by the actual sufferings of people caught in those imperfections. Jesus is not calling blessed those who get upset over issues while scorning people. The Word of God became flesh not ideology. God takes people's

sufferings personally, and we are not following Jesus Christ in his way if are troubled by bad situations but not the distresses of people caught up in them. It is easy to scorn the imperfections of human life (there is so much material to work with), but Jesus came to rescue not to blame, to save not to judge and condemn. Neither did he insist that people clean up and straighten out their lives before coming to him and putting their faith in him.

If, however, we do not spiritualize the beatitudes so much that real, living people in distress are left out of the blessing, then we must face the fact that Jesus' beatitudes make no sense unless life in this world is going to be changed drastically. How exactly are the poor or the poor in spirit blessed? How blessed are people who mourn, who suffer daily indignities, who long for justice denied, who try to make peace between factions that want only to defeat and humiliate each other? It is impossible to make good sense of Jesus' teachings apart from his proclamation of God's coming to change the people of this world and set things right. Without this vital hope for change, the beatitudes became nothing more than pretty little fantasies. Since when do the merciful receive mercy in this world? Or is that promise just the wishful thinking that if I treat people well they will treat me well in return? I paired the beatitudes with a bit of the prophet's account of the Servant scorned and put to death unjustly in hope that we would see that Jesus' teaching belongs to a change that can come only through self-giving love.

The world does not work God's way, and the victims cannot set things right simply by being kind to the world's bullies. How many battered women have been counseled by their clergy to be better wives – more patient, more understanding, more servile – so their husbands will stop beating them? How many people have worked hard to be good employees only to be laid off because somebody at the top overreached during the boom time and put the company in deep debt or because somebody counting the beans decided to cut costs by outsourcing the work to foreign wage slaves or temps given no benefits? How many children have been told that all they must do is stand up to the bully and he'll back down only to learn painfully it does not work that way? How blessed are the poor in a land where wage theft is a daily practice? How blessed are the meek, the humble, when some hundred thousand children each year are sold or kidnaped into sexual slavery? There is a big difference between a pacifier and a peacemaker, and Jesus is no pacifier offering cheap, pious comfort to people whose suffering goes unrelieved. He came to make peace, not to pacify, and the making of peace requires justice that goes far beyond mere retribution. He came to change the human mind, heart and will, not merely to give the upper hand to former victims so that cruelty gets a new face.

So, before us lie two dead ends and one narrow path open between them. The first dead end is religion's age-old way of blessing the status quo and telling people to pray harder, accept it, and make the best of it. The second dead end is revolution that turns daily

suffering into terrible suffering for a time in order to switch positions, changing little if anything beyond the identity of the privileged and powerful. I used to wonder, for example, how much Vietnamese peasants really cared who won the war. We fight wars over whose ideology will prevail to give its adherents control, wealth, and privilege. Notice that Jesus declares blessed the very people who have none of those things, no matter which side wins. For them, he says, the kingdom of God is coming.

Between the two dead ends runs a narrow, steep, and rocky path that few are willing to take, but those who do take it go that way, not to find a better life for themselves, but in hope of saving others from misery or at least being of some comfort to them. Years ago now, Peter Mikuliak spoke here at a church supper. Peter expended his life serving the kind of people Jesus names as blessed, though the world deems them otherwise. In South America, he helped widows of men who had been made to disappear develop cooperatives so they could provide for their families. In Peru, he went undercover to work with the people of the land caught between the government with its death squads and the Shining Path guerrillas who preached Communist ideology and grew cocaine for the Columbian cartels. Peter told me the guerrillas would have beheaded him if they had caught him; the government might simply have made him disappear. Nine years ago, to the sorrow of many, cancer took Peter's life not long after he was married and was preparing to become an Orthodox priest. He served no ideology, no revolution, but he could not bear the status quo which imposes so much suffering and despair upon the humble, the poor, the powerless. He served only the promise of Jesus and his gospel (his good news of God's coming to redeem, heal, and give life). Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. His obituary posted by the Orthodox Church in America is titled, "A life worth living."³

Most of us do not go to work between violent revolutionaries and brutally oppressive and murderous governments. The way of Jesus does not necessarily lead toward martyrdom in that literal sense, but it does follow the path of choosing compassion over correctness, empathy over scorn, generosity and sharing over greed and enterprise philanthropy, humility over arrogance, suffering over revenge, grief over callousness, and self-giving over self-serving. It is a way of life that expends itself in faith and hope. It seeks benefit and blessing for others. It gives in order to share rather than to ingratiate and control. It grieves rather than rationalize life's losses because it trusts God for the promise that "love never ends." Faith takes that narrow path because it trusts God to lead. Hope takes it because it looks beyond the roughness of the path to the promised place beyond the horizon. Love takes it because love knows no other way to go. Amen.

Notes:

1. Luke 6:17-49.

2. Sympathy may seem the better word because it indicates a harmony in suffering, a sympathetic vibration of feelings and emotions that enables them to be shared to some degree even though the sympathetic person cannot fully feel and know what the sufferer is feeling. The word sympathy, however, has undergone somewhat the same degradation as pity, so that both now smack of condescension – of the benevolent superiority of one reaching down to the pitiable sufferer. The Affect Script Psychology I find most helpful for understanding human emotion has chosen the word empathy to represent emotional responsiveness that resonates with the feelings of another while respecting the other person's independence and dignity.

3. http://jacwell.org/Summer_2000/peter_mikuliak.htm