“Blessed” - Stephanie Sorge, 1.22.23

Last week, my sermon title was, “There Will Be a Test.” I didn’t expect that test to be a positive COVID test! This week, I chose the title “Blessed.” I’ll keep you posted.

As Scripture passages are concerned, the Beatitudes are pretty well known. Or somewhat known. I always think of the scene in Monty Python’s “Life of Brian,” where the people listening to Jesus way back in the crowd are straining to hear. “I think he said, blessed are the cheesemakers.” “What’s so special about the cheesemakers?” asks a woman. Her husband patiently explains, “Well, obviously it’s not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Beatitudes can be found just about anywhere. You can buy them at the mall, and then hang them on the wall. Read them in a book, then make your own latch-hook. No need to look them up - they’re right on your coffee cup! But what do they mean?

First, let’s just recognize what a masterful teacher Jesus was. His immediate audience is his disciples, who are gathered to hear and engage with his teaching. This is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, which is really something like Jesus’s greatest hits. These were things Jesus taught, or sayings he repeated in his ministry, collected in one convenient package. The imagery is memorable, the turns of phrase are simple, but thought-provoking. Two thousand years later, we’re still trying to interpret them. I think any teacher would be pretty pleased with that lesson longevity!

Too often, these have been interpreted as panaceas for the downtrodden of the world. They have glorified suffering, grief, and persecution, and in the process, offered many well-meaning Christians an easy out. If those who are suffering so much right now are actually promised great blessing because of it, then it’s ok if we aren’t working to alleviate that suffering, right? And if we can offer the poor and suffering spiritual ministrations, thoughts, and prayers, what could be better than that? More insidiously, these blessings have been used to perpetuate abuse and injustice. Meekness and suffering have been forced upon already marginalized, disenfranchised, and abused people, and then reinforced as God’s divine intent. That’s not at all what Jesus meant. In his ministry, he centered and uplifted the downtrodden, healed the sick, comforted the bereaved, encouraged the hopeless, and empowered the persecuted. We can’t separate these platitudes from the work that they call us to engage.

From another angle, the Beatitudes have been used to shame. Luke’s version certainly has, as each blessing is paired with a woe. Woe to the rich, the satisfied, and those who are laughing now. Even if the Beatitudes don’t shame us, they can cause some personal discomfort. Clearly Jesus is describing an upheaval of the status quo. The kingdom of heaven is not like our current social or political environment. Systems of power, privilege, and wealth will be turned upside down. Passages like this invite us to consider where we are located in this great reversal.

The Beatitudes have also been a source of comfort. Debie Thomas writes, “What Jesus bears witness to in the Beatitudes is God’s unwavering proximity to pain, suffering, sorrow, and loss. God is nearest to those who are lowly, oppressed, unwanted, and broken. God isn’t obsessed with the shiny and and the impressive; God is too busy sticking close to what’s messy, chaotic, unruly, and unattractive.”[[2]](#footnote-2) When we are at our lowest, or feeling most hopeless, or when we feel like God has abandoned us or others we love, we can cling to this assurance. These are the people Jesus accompanied, and God is still found in those hardest places, where there is deep human suffering and despair. That is good news.

God is present in our suffering, but God does not cause it in order to bless us. I don’t believe that God puts us in adverse conditions or makes anyone suffer for the purpose of growth. There is a lot of popular theology I’d like to challenge that preaches along those lines. Still, suffering is part of our human reality. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr wrote: “I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. …I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved … I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive.”[[3]](#footnote-3) I’m grateful to Dane Byers for highlighting this quote in our recent Session retreat. The Beatitudes offer a lens for reframing suffering, finding the blessing in circumstances we’d rather avoid.

Beyond the different ways this passage has been used are the many questions of interpretation - both in terms of language, and asking ourselves what Jesus really means by all of this. The word translated as “blessed” can also be translated as “happy” or “fortunate.” That really puts a different spin on them. “Happy are people who grieve?” Isn’t that a bit of an oxymoron? It certainly does open some new ways of approaching these familiar verses, though.

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine reframes these antecedents differently than I’ve heard them framed before. She suggests that “the poor in spirit” refers to those who can clearly see the many inequalities in the world and know that these inequalities should not exist. Those people aren’t necessarily poor, but their lives are guided by the commitment to realigning the reality according to God’s economics.

Those who grieve are blessed, she says. Not only will they be comforted, ultimately, but grieving itself points to blessing. When we grieve the loss of a loved one, the grief is proportionally acute to the love we shared. We are blessed to love deeply enough to grieve. Those who have the time and space to grieve are also blessed. Jewish practices, including sitting Shiva and marking yahrzeit, create this time and space. To be given leave from responsibilities to grieve is a blessing, and to grieve while surrounded by a community of love and support, a blessing.

The meek are blessed to inherit the earth. It’s easy to think of this paternalistically, or to fall back on the overused “least of these.” Worse yet is when verses like this are twisted to reinforce hierarchies of power and dominance. All of that misses the point. The meek are those who lead with humility and an appropriate sense of place in community and creation. Aren’t those exactly the people we want to be entrusted to steward the earth?

I appreciate the accessibility of her readings. It’s easier to see ourselves as among the blessed, and to recognize that with blessing comes responsibility. The covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants was a promise of blessing, so that through them, all nations of the world would be blessed.

She also thinks Jesus was speaking these blessings for the disciples. Sure, others are allowed to overhear in transmission, but Jesus is speaking to his closest followers. When we get to the final Beatitude, the language moves from third person to second - “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…” The disciples may have identified with some of the other categories of blessing - maybe most or all of them. But in case they hadn’t yet, Jesus includes this final blessing, which certainly applies to all of them.

In other words, Jesus isn’t just teaching about those people out there, he is speaking directly to his disciples. You are blessed. It’s not to pat them on the back, but rather an affirmation of a deep truth that they will need to sustain them in the days ahead. At this point in the Gospel, Jesus has been baptized, tempted, called his disciples, and begun his public ministry. Now, as he teaches them and prepares them to participate in that ministry, he begins with a blessing. Matthew’s gospel will end with an exhortation - “Go and make disciples…” but before the disciples get to that mountaintop in Galilee, they are fed and strengthened on this one. Jesus assures his followers that they are blessed. God is with them. They have all they need to fulfill the callings to which they will be called.

One other interpretation I appreciate comes from the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber. “So,” she says, “maybe Jesus is actually just blessing people, especially the people who never seem to receive blessings otherwise. I mean, come on, doesn’t that just *sound* like something Jesus would do? Extravagantly throwing around blessings as though they grew on trees?”[[4]](#footnote-4) She goes on to make her own list of beatitudes, which includes “those who have nothing to offer… they for whom nothing seems to be working… the kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables… the unemployed, the unimpressive…, the burnt-out social workers and the over worked teachers…” and more.

These familiar blessings of Jesus continue to challenge and stretch us. They continue to speak to us today, and we could keep adding to the list. Who is God blessing these days? Or more accurately, who most needs to hear it? Who are the people who are hearing a message from the world that they are not lovable or worthy of blessing? God’s blessing is wildly inclusive, but there are some who need to hear those words of blessing, especially. Jesus knew the importance of speaking these blessings, and making them specific. We can also be part of speaking God’s blessing for those who need to hear it, because the message they often get from the world around them is not one of blessing. Sometimes, we are the ones that need to hear it.

And so I say, blessed are the trans, gender nonbinary, and gender fluid, for they reflect God’s image uniquely. Blessed are the addicts, for their lives are just as important to God. Blessed are the mentally ill, for they are safe and welcomed in God’s kingdom. Blessed are the undocumented, and those who seek safe havens, for the Holy Family found shelter in Egypt. Blessed are the those with Alzheimer’s or Dementia, for God holds them in love and dignity, and they will be restored. Blessed are those whose feeble bodies betray sharp minds, for they will be transformed. Blessed are those who fight for justice, and creation care, for they are partners in the kingdom of heaven. And blessed are you, in spite of and because of all of the ways you do not feel blessed or blessable. God loves you, and blesses you, and delights in you. Amen.

1. Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, written by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, and Terry Gilliam [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Debie Thomas, *Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ,* p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/suffering-and-faith [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/11/some-modern-beatitudes-a-sermon-for-all-saints-sunday/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)