

10/05/14 -- Communion Sunday

“The Beatitudes: What they mean for us”-- © Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-11

One of the topic requests I received at the beginning of the summer was “*What do the Beatitudes mean for us?*” This is a topic which has volumes written about it. Today, I want to just look at what Jesus is trying to tell us about who we are as his followers. Next Sunday, we will look at what we are to do with this information.

It is important to understand that the Beatitudes represent not a single sermon that Jesus gave once. The Beatitudes are a composite of what Jesus constantly taught. The Greek from our reading today would more accurately read, “*This is what Jesus used to always teach.*”

I believe most of us read these words today with a perspective on **doing**. “*What am I supposed to do? How do I enact these recommendations from Jesus?*” We are a “doing culture”. When you meet a new person, eventually the question will come around, “*What do you do?*”, which means, “*How do you make a living in the world?*” It is a measuring question, a status question, before it is an informational question. But Jesus is not telling the disciples what to do here. He is telling them *who they are*, now that they follow him.

‘Being’ questions are much more difficult than ‘doing’ questions. If I have to explore who I am, I will eventually confront those places that are out of whack with what I truly want for myself and others. It is easier to just not deal with ‘being’ questions. It is easier to just do stuff. We feel better if we can look back at what we have done, even if what we have done is radically separated from what we love and care about in our deepest being.

So the Beatitudes are a sharp and bright light into ourselves, especially into places that are not aligned with God and Christ. The first four Beatitudes are about the *core of our being*. The next three are about our *attitude toward doing things* in the world and for others. The last two are about how we handle the reaction of the world because of *who we are*.

The questions which arise here are good ones for us as a church community to ask. I will be asking these questions of myself and of all of you as we enter into the new church year: *Who are we as a church? Who are you as a follower of Christ? What do you really want here?* Even if you don’t know much about your faith, you know that we are broken, fallen people. We are inclined to self-centered behavior, inward, judgmental focus, reliant on self rather than God. Call it what you will, but the word Scripture uses for this is *sin*. Answering the questions means beginning where we are - sinners seeking God.

But we also know, because we follow God through Jesus Christ, that we are called to remember who we were created to be. We were created to be the willing servants of God in the created Earth we have been given by God. In the image of God, male and female, he created us. This is what baptism, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, seek to restore within us and within the world.

The core of our being

Jesus begins by telling the disciples who they are at the core of their being. Once chosen by Christ, or once we choose Christ, we are given a new foundation for our being. Jesus tells us in the first four Beatitudes what that foundation is.

As a follower of Jesus, you are poor in Spirit.

Being poor in spirit means you understand, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you are incapable of doing anything, either in this world or in your spiritual life, without God. I found out a few years ago that the motto of my Welsh ancestors is “*Without God, without nothing.*” which is a weird phrasing of this Beatitude. It means that without God, I am nothing. Without God, I can do nothing and anything I have done without God amounts to nothing. The kingdom of Heaven is only available to those who know there is no way to attain the kingdom of Heaven except through the will of God. And isn’t that what we pray whenever we say, *Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done?*

As a follower of Jesus, you mourn.

Paul says in Romans 12: *Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another...(15-16a)*. Comfort is available to us when we put ourselves in positions of mourning with others their sadness and losses. We only know true comfort when we have provided comfort. One of the things I love most about the Christian faith is that it takes the situation of the world straight on.

Many things are improving around the world. Did you know violent crime around the world has decreased dramatically since the 1970s? Did you know fewer people are in extreme poverty as a percentage of the world’s population than at any time in world history? These are all good and true and holy things. We can justifiably thank God for being witnesses to such things. But it is still a sad world, a suffering world. The follower of Jesus knows the depths of the world’s sadness and suffering. A big part of why we know something of the sadness of the world is because we know how far our own actions and thoughts, our own sin, separate us from God. We mourn for the losses of others, the difficulties of the world, and our distance from God. If we take the Beatitudes seriously, mourning becomes our partner, one of the pillars of our deepest being. We can only walk in mourning because we also know the joy of the comfort of the Lord.

As a follower of Jesus, you are meek.

“Meek” in ancient Greece and in Rome was a word used for self-control. Self-control, in Jesus’ sense here, is humility before God. There is no pride here. And really, self-control in the Christian sense means God-controlled, or God-empowered. As with all the Beatitudes, we must be willing to confront our inner-most being. Meekness means recognizing on a deep and fundamental level that there is really very little we know about the world and others. It means recognizing there is very little we have control over. We have taken “meek” in our day and age to mean “willing to be walked all over.” That is not what I mean here. Meekness in Jesus’ terms means being willing to say, “*I don’t know, but I am willing to find out with you.*” Meekness means letting go of being right all the time (which is a real drag for someone like me...). Meekness means walking upon the earth with a faint but present sense of the original awe and wakefulness inspired and experienced in the Garden. Inherit the Garden by allowing God to be in control again. We don’t know everything. We know very little. We don’t know enough about much at all. But we do know Christ, and relying on Christ means we know we are heirs, and if heirs, then children of God. That is a good place to begin learning about God and others.

As a follower of Jesus, you hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Hunger and thirst are not experiences most of us are familiar with. The words for hunger and thirst here are meant to invoke famine and drought. Jesus means what the Old Testament means by righteousness - justice for the impoverished and downtrodden, the orphans and

widows. Do you hunger and thirst for justice? Not for yourself, but for those who have been disenfranchised and thrown away by our culture. What would justice look like for all those who have been messed up by rapacious banks; for those who have been made homeless by the deliberate and structured erasure of earning power in our economy; for those who cannot find work because they have paid their debt to society in prison?

Remember why Jesus came. He tells us in the Gospel of Luke, quoting Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Lk 4:18-19)*. This is what justice and righteousness looks like. Do we want the same thing like a starving person wants food, a parched person wants water? Wanting it that much also means the need will be satisfied, if God is given the avenues to do so, if we can *make straight the ways of the Lord* so the Lord can do the work of justice in the world.

This, then, is who you are as a follower of Christ: *you are an impoverished spirit who must rely completely on God, in mourning for a fallen world, knowing that all you really know is that you are saved by Christ and now all you see is the need for justice everywhere*. And this knowledge also lets you know that as a follower of Christ: *you are a resident of the kingdom of heaven who is comforted by the joy of the Lord, who has given you the abundant opportunity to learn at the feet of Christ so you can stand tall in this world now so that God's righteousness might be seen through you for the benefit of all*.

The attitude with which a follower of Christ does things

Because you follow Christ, you are merciful.

Being merciful does not mean being paternal and care-taking because of what you have and others do not. Mercy is not for you now. Mercy means walking in the place of another person. Mercy means being willing to find out what another person's world is like. Mercy requires relationship and openness. Mercy requires that we be affected by the experience of others. The attitude of mercy breaks down the walls we have constructed between ourselves and others. "Us" and "them" are no longer applicable categories when we are merciful. Because of our foundation in the first four Beatitudes, we have a pretty good idea of the mercy God has shown us. If we have been shown the mercy of God through Christ, the fullest mercy we show another creature is a mere shadow of the great things God has done for us.

Because you follow Christ, you are pure in heart.

What are your motives for the things you do, the decisions you make, the reasons you say this and do that? Can any of us say a straight line runs from the temple within where the Spirit resides to our thoughts, actions and words? How many cross-purposes cut across the path from that place where God plumbs the depths of your soul to the point where you make a decision? Purity of heart is the great challenge of God-focused people throughout time. The desires of ego and personality are extremely powerful. Many times, we substitute 'ego' and 'personal desire' for God, call the substitution 'God' and then act in full belief we are acting in the name of God. A foundation in holy meekness, in impoverished spirit, in mourning, and hunger and thirst for justice have no place in the cross-purposes of the self. More than any other Beatitude, this one convicts us in the mere saying of it by showing us we are not pure in heart.

My anger, my lust, my self-proclaimed need to be right corrupt the purity sought by the Holy Spirit.

Remember the words of Psalm 51: *You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart...Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me (6,10)*. Only God's work within us allows us to see God. Only the purity of heart instilled by the Holy Spirit through our baptism allows us any possibility of a straight path from deepest being to outward action and word. Once we have disassembled every block between the Spirit within ourselves and God will we be pure enough to see God.

Because you follow Christ, you are a peace-maker.

I think most people love the idea of peace, but very few want to get into the act of actually making peace. We are, as Paul says, by our Beatitude nature now ambassadors of Christ and ministers of reconciliation. Our work as children of God is making peace. Not just ending conflict and sectarian separation, but in the positive sense of creating a community of hope and faith and love which builds people up and draws them into the loving embrace of God. Think about the unspoken corollary here: those who sow conflict and deliberately separate (hate) are not the children of God. You can fill in who is at work if conflict and separation are at work within a community. Peace, in the biblical sense, is always not just the negation of something, it is also an addition to something. Our intended playground as children of God is the positive presence of peace which engenders fellowship, community and forgiveness.

How we deal with what the world throws at us

Because of who we are in Christ and our attitude toward the world, when we do or say things as followers of Christ, there can be a major kickback. Jesus says to the disciples: *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account*. In America, we don't really know what persecution means. There are those who think persecution means being criticized for ideas or words shouted in public places. Christianity is a religion of deep thought and powerful ideas. Throughout its history, Christians willingly put their ideas and thoughts out into the marketplace of ideas to be argued against, challenged and reasoned about. If we claim persecution every time a Christian is argued against, then we willfully abdicate our chair in the throne-room of great ideas.

No, arguments against the faith are not persecution. Persecution looks like the destruction of the cathedral in Mosul, Iraq. Persecution looks like the imprisoned missionary in North Korea who broke the law by bringing Bibles into the country. Persecution looks like people burning books in Africa. The danger in claiming the label of being persecuted is that it is often a cover for the willful persecution of others. We claim persecution so we can persecute with abandon.

Jesus calls us here to have always an expectation that the tail of the beast will swing around and catch us up in it. Persecution of Christians is not uncommon throughout the history of the faith. When persecution and actual censorship of the faith comes, Jesus has given us a foundation in the Beatitudes for how to face it. We know ourselves to be, first and foremost, residents of the kingdom of heaven, not of this world. We are pilgrims passing through this veil of tears. We also know that a foundation in the Beatitudes is one that brings joy, peace and hope, not only for ourselves but also for others. That is why persecution leads to blessedness

and when it comes our way, we respond with gladness and rejoicing, even while actively trying to end it.

The Beatitudes redefine who we are. The questions of your past no longer apply. Now all our personal questions are always in relation to the person of Jesus Christ. Who are you in Christ? Who do you want to be as a follower of Christ? What kind of church will we be? What do we really want? Jesus gives us some powerful guidelines in the Beatitudes. Will we follow him?

Amen.