

## Beatitudes

### Sermon on the Mount #1: "Congratulations – Now!"

1 Corinthians 2: 6-9

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### Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 5: 1-12:

*Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain  
and when he sat down,  
his disciples came to him, and he taught them saying:*

*Congratulations to the poor in Spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Congratulations to those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.  
Congratulations to the meek,  
For they will inherit the earth.  
Congratulations to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be satisfied.*

*Congratulations to the merciful,  
for they will find mercy.  
Congratulations to the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.  
Congratulations to the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.  
Congratulations to those persecuted for righteousness' sake,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Congratulations to you when they insult you and harass you  
and say all kinds of slander untruthfully against you for my sake.  
Rejoice and be glad, because your reward is great in the heavens,  
for they persecuted the prophets who were before you in the same way.*

The beatitudes are one of the most familiar passages in the bible. But maybe too familiar. We've made it quite comforting. But there is more. A whole other level of meaning. This is the sermon that kick-started Jesus' ministry. It needed to have a dynamic, catalytic, compelling power to transform people and get them moving.

Jesus climbed to the mountain top, and set off fireworks. Big ones, like all those 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks: Comet; Peony; Chrysanthemum; Crossett; and Willow with sparks cascading all the way down. The Beatitudes are a DYNAMIC VISION of THE WORLD BEGINNING ALL OVER AGAIN.

I read you David Buttrick's translation, which is quite different than the versions that say, "blessed." "Congratulations" raises a question: Have you ever been honored? There are lots of ways people can be honored:

Maybe you did something big and they gave you a ticker tape parade.

Maybe they put a medal on your chest, and gave you a salute.

Maybe you were honored with Applause. A standing ovation.

Or maybe a simple sitting ovation.

Maybe people raised their cell phone flashlight, and waved it, with others doing the same all around stadium, because you rock!

Maybe you worked someplace 40 years and got a gold watch.

Or a plaque to hang on the wall.

Maybe someone has honored you with a thank you letter.

Maybe they just quietly said, "I saw what you did. What you did was important."

To be honored means, in big ways or small: You are some sort of hero. It may be for one person. Or it may be for thousands. But you have discovered and embodied what is truly most important in life. It means: Congratulations! You've won! You are some sort of rock star: we ought to put up posters of people like you. You remind us how to live. What is most truly important.

The problem we face is that we live in a world that has lost its soul. It needs a new vision. Jesus' inaugural speech is intensified visioning. Aimed at lifting up people who are dedicated to a new way of life. These celebrated faithful ones are the front line, the first generation, the advance guard. The faithful who act, think, and behave like empowered children of God.

In this sermon, Jesus provides us with a vocabulary and a fund of experiences, paradigms and symbols that enflame and enable us to re-imagine the good life, the good society.

Jesus begins: Congratulations to the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Poor in spirit, they know what needs to be done, and they have given it their all. To those whose spirit is exhausted. Blessed are the teachers who sweat to make their subjects exciting to their students. To set young minds on fire! Blessed are the youth workers, who keep on staying up all night at church lock-ins, seeking to make and help the youth feel the joy of being the people of God. Blessed are those who see the age of decadence around us, and give it their all to reignite a time of creativity, community, warmth and hope.

Congratulations to those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Congratulations to those who see how the world is off course. Who see how the world is corrupt and seek to speak out and change it. Congratulations to those who lament the destruction publically. And who help others lament about it too.

Congratulations in the most profound, deep, serious sense: Blessed are the journalists who have been murdered in country after country; you have lifted up the truth. You will be comforted with the truth.

Blessed are the environmentalists murdered trying to protect something as delicate as a butterfly habitat in Mexico. Blessed are people such as these, who mourn, and lament, and lift up what is wrong with the world.

You are our heroes. You have shown us the truth, and helped us to lament what is going on. If we listen, we can change the world because of your lament. You shall be comforted.

Blessed are those who mourn. In a culture that pretends that everything is just fine, there are things truly worth mourning about. Losses, failures, mistakes. Blessed are those who lift up their voices and lament. It is the only way the world will change.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

My friend was 40 years old when he became a second career student at Princeton Theological Seminary. In his first career, he had been highly accomplished in his field, and was kind of a know-it-all. He was feeling full of himself one day in his New Testament class. So he said, "What's this nonsense about, 'blessed are the meek – where has meekness gotten us anywhere?' His professor shot back: "Blessed are the meek means, blessed are the teachable."

In a world where people all have their talking points and constantly talk over one another, impervious to any other point of view, in such a world: "Blessed are the teachable." Congratulations: you win! For through the darkness, those who are teachable have the possibility of light shining through. In a world of people who know it all, blessed are the teachable blessed are those who listen, who take time to listen, and who expect to be surprised.

Congratulations to the meek: they shall inherit the earth.

Congratulations to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – for they shall be satisfied.

In 1995, the Malden Mills factory in Lawrence, Massachusetts burned down. The company could have downsized, they could have moved overseas or the owner could have pocketed the 300 million dollars of insurance money.

Instead CEO Arron Feuerstein spent all 300 million dollars, and went out and borrowed 100 million more. He rebuilt an environmentally safe, worker friendly factory. And, more than that, the whole 6 months it took to rebuild, he kept all three thousand employees on the payroll with full benefits.

He says he learned in the Talmud “You are not permitted to oppress the working man...” He said, “I have a responsibility to the worker.... I have a responsibility to the community. It would have been unconscionable to put 3,000 people on the streets and deliver a death-blow to the cities of Lawrence and Methuen. Maybe on paper our company is worthless to Wall Street, but I can tell you it’s worth more.” (Fluker, p.182)

That is the voice of someone who is satisfied. Blessed are those who do the right thing.

Congratulations to the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are those who know that God is merciful, so they get in touch with that mercy, and show it in their own lives.

When the people of God fix a pot of soup for hungry people in the church kitchen, it matters.

When a team helps build a new home for Habitat for Humanity, it is an act of mercy.

When a group goes with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to help someone recover and rebuild after a tornado, a flood, a hurricane, that is an act of mercy. When a group of faithful go put pressure on their legislators to help build more low cost housing for the poor....that is an act of mercy.

Jesus says: Celebrate these people! Honor them! They get it! They get what love is about.

Bless them merciful: They will themselves feel overwhelming mercy.

They know that we hold one another in our hands.

Congratulations to the pure in heart – for they shall see God.

Soren Kierkegaard said, “Purity of heart is to will one thing. “Blessed are those who have integrity.

Blessed are those whose integrity is pure.

Steven Carter says integrity has 3 dimensions:

1. Do your beliefs fit with the kingdom of God?
2. And do you follow those beliefs? Do you live them out?
3. Do you talk about it: to make it clear.

Jesus says, celebrate those who have integrity that befits the Kingdom of God.

Robert Bolt’s play, A Man for All Seasons, is about Sir Thomas More’s lone defiance of King Henry the VIII. More says,

*“When a man takes an oath,  
he’s holding his own self in his own hands like water.*

*If he opens his fingers then,  
he need not hope to find himself again."*

Such people know what is right. They do what is right. They speak up and say why they are doing what they are doing. Principles that you don't follow in the tough times are just hobbies. To decide is a defining moment. Those defining moments where leaders have to decide if they have core values. If they chose to follow those core values, they renew their sense of purpose. (Fluker, p. 182)

You may not have agreed with Mitt Romney's vote this last week, but it was powerful to see an act of such faithful integrity, as he made it clear what motivated him was his oath to God. Blessed are the pure in heart – for they shall see God.

Congratulations to the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

We live in a world that has come to believe in the doctrine of redemptive violence: that salvation comes by retribution. It is under the guidance of the myth that we will only truly be saved by violence, redemptive violence.

I think of the story of the man down in Texas, who heard something on the porch, got his gun, opened the door, stepped out on the porch and saw an armadillo. Since he already had his gun out and cocked, he shot it. The bullet proceeded to ricochet off the armadillo, bounce back and hit the man in the leg. He is a perfect example of Napoleon's dictum: You can do anything with a bayonet except sit on it. If we have a weapon, we are going to use it, and we believe violence will save us.

But it does not have to be that way. There is another way. I think of Hal Halversen, a pilot for Berlin airlift in the late 1940s. He was part of those flying food into the encircled city. One day, he walked around and saw a group of 30 children. Dejected. Sad. He wanted to cheer them up, so he gave them all he had: 2 sticks of gum. He watched as they carefully divided them up so almost everyone had a small piece. Then they passed the gum wrappers to those who didn't get any gum, and they proceeded to sniff the wrapper and smile.

On his next trip, Hal, the co-pilot and navigator pooled all their candy, made a parachute out of a couple of handkerchiefs and dropped candy to kids. After three weeks doing this, his commander gave him permission to send more.

Newspapers got word of these Candy Bombers and contributions came flowing in. By the time they were finished a year and a half later, they had dropped 250,000 handkerchiefs with 23 tons of candy. The candy bombers. Peacemakers who see the storms of human ravaging, rage and revenge, and seek to still the storms distraught minds with humanity, serenity, and hope.

Congratulations to the peacemakers – you are already children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Congratulations when people utter all sorts of lies about you for Jesus' sake and the gospel. Rejoice and be glad: For your reward is great: you are like the prophets.

When you do the right thing, we see time and again, you are likely to be persecuted: hassled, hounded, intimidated. Tossed out of your job, and escorted to the door like a criminal. Doing the right thing is not easy. When you stir up a nest of hornets, you might get stung. When you stir up a nest of snakes you might get bit.

Blessed are those who take the heat. Nothing ever happens if people drift. To get somewhere, you have to put some prophetic pressure on the gas pedal. You are some sort of hero. Maybe a hero for one person, or maybe for thousands. But you have discovered and embodied what is most important in life. You are a rock star: we ought to put up posters of people like you. You remind us how to live. What is most truly important.

“Blessed are” in the beatitudes means congratulations. You’ve already won! We ought to throw a ticker tape parade for these people. They are our heroes. We ought to put up posters of these people – they are rock stars. They rock – they make us want to get up and dance. They remind us of how to live. They remind us of what is truly important. They remind us of what heaven is like. You help us see what earth can be, in the grace of God, whenever the faithful live like the people of God we are called to be.

Congratulations!

Sources:

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