

Matthew 5:1-20
A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
for A Sermon for Every Sunday, 2020

We are moving through Matthew's narrative of the good news about Jesus Christ. A few Sundays ago we read about Jesus' baptism, when the heavens opened and God's Spirit descended, and a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I'm well pleased." This was followed, of course, by Christ's temptation in the wilderness – a time and place where Jesus wrestled with the stories the world tells about identity and power and glamour and *THINGS* that *MIGHT* satisfy our yearnings. Jesus resisted those stories and came to tell a *different story*: that human salvation and satisfaction and identity come not from what we can achieve or prove, *but from God*. Jesus emerged from the wilderness in the strength of that truth, called disciples to join him in living out that truth, and today begins to teach other people what it means to live as *GOD'S people*.

Jesus brings them together on a mountain. We know this teaching as the Sermon on the Mount. And the mountain matters. From the time of Moses, God has spoken from the mountain. God has met people upon the mountain. And in Jesus, God will do so again!

But gosh, I've been imagining myself amidst that crowd, eager to hear Christ's inaugural address. What has he come for? What's his vision of all we might be? He begins to speak. "*HAPPY are the people who are HOPELESS*," he says . . . "*Happy are the people who GRIEVE*." Now I'm imagining that awkward moment where you start to think, "*Maybe . . . I'm at the wrong rally*."

What we call "beatitudes" are nothing new. Jesus didn't invent the *FORM* where certain people are declared happy or blessed by God. In the psalms and the prophets there are beatitudes that resemble Christ's. Still, I think it's fair to say: *these are not your grandma's beatitudes*. 'Cause she was fond of saying "Happy are men with sensible wives!" "Happy are people who mind their tongue!" "Happy are women whose children make them glad!" In *your grandma's* beatitudes, people are happy, because their actions have led to some observable reward. This is the WISDOM TRADITION of scripture; it offers advice for successful living. Christ's beatitudes don't do *THAT*. They are *PROPHETIC DECLARATIONS*. Jesus makes them out of his *conviction* about the coming-and-already-present kingdom of God.

It reminds me about Henri Nouwen's distinction between optimism and hope. Nouwen says they are radically different attitudes. "Optimism is the expectation that things – the weather, human relationships, the economy, the political situation, and so on – will get better. [Grandma's beatitudes were OPTIMISTIC; you could act in a good way and expect good things would happen. HOPE, according to Nouwen] is the trust that God will fulfill God's promises to us in a way that leads us to true freedom.

The optimist speaks about concrete changes in the future.

The person of hope lives in the moment with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands."

The people Jesus speaks about in his beatitudes are hopeful people – people who live in the moment with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in God’s good hands. These people are “*makarios*”. That’s the Greek – the closest thing we have to the word Jesus might have used. “Makarios” has been translated and understood in a variety of ways. The most common translations are blessed and happy. You might also say that the “makarios” are joyful ... saved ... greatly honored ... even AWESOME. My current-favorite-translation comes via the Spanish *bienaventuranza* – which translates to English “a good adventure to you.” The Rev. Jorge Lara-Braud, brought that to my attention. He said, “We all know that adventure means risk, the courage to defy the odds, the refusal to play it safe.” To follow Jesus is no picnic. It’s an adventure, full of risk, requiring courage.

Looking over Christ’s declarations about the *KINDS of people* who can make this adventure, it struck me, they are all people who have *GOTTEN OVER THEMSELVES* in significant ways. They’ve *gotten PAST* not only the *worldly* desires for power or prestige or possessions, but also our basic human needs for safety, for recognition, for achievement or understanding or simple peace and quiet. I led a class recently on the Enneagram, where we talked about the nine different ways people cope, striving to make sense of the world, to be seen, to secure the love and admiration of others. But the goal of understanding *what DRIVES your personality* is to get past that. *Because each of us is more than our coping strategy*. Each of us is more than our particular talent. Each of us is more than anything we can earn or prove. Beneath ALL of that is our ESSENTIAL SELF – what Christians believe is created and cherished and blessed by God.

Getting in touch with that (with our essential self and worth) . . . it can be hard. I suspect that the difficulty conveyed in Christ’s beatitudes relates to *how hard it is* to *GET AT* what is truest about each of us. Happy are the “poor in spirit.” These are the very empty ones, the people who have gotten beneath all the trappings of this world and all the striving people are prone to do – to see themselves and the world as God does.

I recently found a beautiful expression of this “blessedness” in the writing of Tony Hoagland. He was *emptied out* not by any spiritual practice, but by the fact of getting cancer. Hoagland died a couple years ago of pancreatic cancer. He felt moved to speak of what he was learning in the midst of his treatment– moved to share it with America, because he perceived a sickness in this country – the sickness of racism. He saw it afflicting white people, primarily – people like Hoagland himself – people who grew up hearing *THAT VOICE* that whispers we deserve to be on top, that to profit is our just reward. It’s hard to be *poor in spirit* when that’s the voice that you hear! But Hoagland saw other people suffering from racism, too: anyone who thinks someone of another religion, color, or background is not indisputably, equally human. Hoagland suggested getting cancer puts such illusions to rest. I want to share with you a good bit of his story, because I think his realizations reveal Christ’s blessing.

Speaking to America, Hoagland began:

the first time you enter the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Texas, “you may feel [alien and forsaken, and like you’ve] been singled out unfairly, plucked from your healthy life and cast into this cruel ordeal. Walking through the lobby with a manila envelope of X-rays under your arm and a folder of lab reports and notes from your previous doctor, you’ll sense the deep tremor of your animal fear

But there is good news, too. As you pass one hallway after another, looking for elevator B, you’ll see that this place is full of people — riding the escalators, reading books and magazines, checking their phones near the coffeepots. And it will dawn on you that most of these people have cancer. In fact, it seems as if the whole world has cancer. With relief and dismay you’ll realize: *I’m not special. Everybody here has cancer.* The withered old Jewish lefty newspaper editor. The Latino landscape contractor with the stone-roughened hands. The tough lesbian with the bleached-blond crew cut and the black leather jacket. And you will be cushioned and bolstered by the sheer number and variety of your fellows.

This strange country of cancer, it turns out, is the true democracy — one more real than the nation that lies outside these walls and more authentic than the lofty statements of politicians In the country of cancer everyone is simultaneously a have and a have-not. In this land no citizens are protected by property, job description, prestige, and pretensions; they are not even protected by their prejudices. Neither money nor education, greed nor ambition, can alter the facts. You are all simply cancer citizens, bargaining for more life.

It is true that this is not a country you ever planned to visit, much less move to. It is true that you may not have previously considered these people your compatriots. But now you have more in common with them than with your oldest childhood friends. You live together in the community of cancer.

More good news: now that you are sick, you have time to think. From this rocky promontory you can contemplate the long history of your choices, your mistakes, your good luck. You can think about race, too, because most of the people who care for you will be nonwhite, often from other countries. You may be too sick to talk, but you can watch them and learn. Your attention is made keen by need and by your intimate dependence upon these inexhaustibly kind strangers.

[Hoagland’s article is full of stories about the encounters that not only shattered his prejudices, but also kindled his gratitude.]

This is the stupefying and ultimately transforming thing, [he said]: that here, where I do not expect it, I encounter decency, patience, compassion, warmth, good humor. I remember the middle-aged nurse from Alabama, his calm Southern twang and beer belly, who stood firm one night, utterly unperturbed while I vomited repeatedly, as if a demon had seized control of my insides. With empathetic watchfulness, he administered the proper shot until I fell backward into a state of blessed relief. I remember the shift nurse with pale-olive skin and thick eyebrows who, in the middle of the night, brought me hot

packs of damp folded towels heated in a microwave. She was from the Middle East, maybe Syria or Egypt. She was so kind and respectful to me that, after she departed, I abruptly burst into tears and blew her a kiss through the closed door.

The historical record — for tolerance, for human learning — is not promising [Hoagland reflected]. Yet I believe, more than ever, that at the bottom of each human being there is a reset button. Undeniably it is difficult to get to. To reach it seems to require that the ego be demolished by circumstance. But reach that button and press it, and the world might reshape itself.

[Unfortunately, Hoagland thought, for America *reaching that button* might require something as unsettling and dire as the experience of cancer.] In order to change, [he said] you must cross this threshold, enter a condition of helplessness, and experience the mysterious intimacy between the sick and their caregivers, between yourself and every person who is equally laid low.

Come [he beckoned] into the fields and meadows of the examination rooms, come to the clean beds, to the infernal beeping of the monitors, to the lobbies and alcoves of this labyrinth. Look at the faces of the ones who are attending to you. Witness those who are silently passing by on their pilgrimage to surgery or radiology. -- Let the workers be fairly paid and valued, for their skills draw us together like the edges of a wound. -- Listen to the music of the voices around you. As the machines tick, as the ventilators suck and heave and exhale, as the very ground beneath our feet starts to dissolve, we shall be changed.”

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You may remember how change has been a critical part of the gospel according to Matthew. From John the Baptist to Jesus, already it's been a common theme – our need to change. And it is *so HARD* for people to do – to get past our egos and understand our dependence on one another and our intimate connection to everything God's made. We must be “poor in spirit.” Richard Rohr describes that poverty as an inner emptiness and humility, a beginner's mind, an ability to live without the need for personal righteousness or reputation. It is like the first step of Alcoholics Anonymous – to admit you are powerless – that your life has become unmanageable. It's what you acknowledge before you can fully turn to God. Before you change.

According to Jesus, these people not only *are BLESSED*, but also *BEAR A BLESSING*. They are the salt of the earth. For ancient people, salt was an important preservative. It was seasoning. It symbolized healing. *THESE PEOPLE* who can weep, who can identify with others who are laid low, who show mercy and work for peace, who find a kind of joy even in the midst of suffering . . . *THEY BLESS THE WORLD AROUND THEM*. They bless us in a way that preserves us, and seasons us, and heals us. So we see what God's kingdom is like. So we may be *MOVED* to take up the good adventure of following Christ.

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