

Sermon on the Beatitudes, Jan. 29, 2023

Have you ever looked at the Beatitudes and wondered what the heck Jesus was talking about? I mean, most of us would probably feel pretty blessed if we were pure in heart or maybe peacemakers. Being meek or merciful or even hungering and thirsting for righteousness is definitely iffy. And not many of us want to be poor in anything, or to mourn and we especially don't want to be persecuted. But Jesus calls them blessed.

And Jesus says these things in a very authoritative way. He sits to speak, which means he was speaking as a rabbi. And the language used means this was an official, important pronouncement, not just off the cuff. That is, the whole sermon on the mount. One commentator said it was the definitive summary of Jesus' message and another called it the pocket guide to life in the Kingdom. There's every chance Jesus came back to these things again and again. They're important. And they go against most of what we would normally think. So let's look at them.

First, the word we see as "blessed" is actually the Greek word Makarios. It means blessed, but not blessed by God particularly, just generally blessed. It means happy, though not a sort of feeling but like we might say, being in a happy situation. Things are good. It means fortunate, but not in the sense of luck. More like, we're in an enviable situation, things are going well for us, things are as they should be, as good as they get.

So, fortunate/happy/blessed are the poor in spirit. Luke just says "poor." Luke's beatitudes are more concrete and literal. Matthew's are more spiritual and ethical. As I said, Jesus probably used these often and in different ways. And the different gospel writers picked up the parts they wanted to emphasize.

Well, most of us would much rather be rich than poor. This would be why most people buy lottery tickets. I don't buy them, but this doesn't stop me from daydreaming about what I'd do if I won a million dollars. Especially on the rare occasions when people give me a ticket. Well, I've always said that if I won a lottery, I would give half the money to charity. I figure it's a free gift and I should pass it on to do some good in the world. I think I have almost more fun figuring out what I'd do with the charitable half.

I've thought I could hire a full time person to reach out to the community in new ways, here at Emmanuel, and maybe come up with some innovative ministries or worship. That could be funded for, say, 5 years, and then the stuff left over from that, maybe I could pay to insulate the church or put proper outer windows over our stained glass to cut the use of oil and save the earth a bit. And make it warmer. Or I might fund some tiny houses for homeless people. Or buy some land for a nature reserve.

And the other half, I'd like to give each of my kids some money, maybe \$100,000 each. Daniel could have a down payment then for a house. They could all pay off their student loans and other debts, put a dent in their mortgages. I'd want to give Mom some, too, because she doesn't have a big pension. That would leave \$150,000. Pay a chunk of our mortgage. And maybe a dream trip to Europe, one of those river cruises. So many things.

Come to think of it, winning a million isn't nearly enough. I would definitely need more to do all the things I've got in mind. Maybe \$5 million..... Well, that's the problem with putting your hopes in money, isn't it? You could always use more. We are never satisfied with what we have. And people I know who are really rich? You know what? They don't tend to be that happy. In fact, they worry almost as much about money as poor people I know.

When the gospel talks about being poor in spirit, it is talking about people who are really poor. So poor, they have no hope or influence in the material world at all. And so they put their trust in God. It recalls to mind all the times in the Old Testament, especially the Psalms, when the Psalmist speaks of the poor or the meek being particularly blessed by God, because they are the ones who turn to God. They have nowhere else to turn. And we humans do tend to turn to other things first, things we can grasp and control. It's only when we've run through those and have nothing left that we turn to God, and that is when we enter that blessed, fortunate, happy state. Because finally we are putting our trust in the only one who can actually be there for us.

Not that that will necessarily solve all our financial problems. But I've noticed that poor people are often the most generous. The most generous with the money they have, with their time, with their hospitality. People who've been to the developing world, where the poverty makes ours look like comparative wealth, say that the people there are so generous and would share their last piece of bread with you. And do it happily. Now if all the richest people in the world had that attitude, they could solve most of the world's problems overnight. And become truly happy.

Here's another. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Well, most of us hate feeling sad and are embarrassed by it. I've had lots of people who have just lost a dear family member apologize for crying and say they don't know what's wrong with them. Really!? I do. You've just lost someone you love and you're sad. That's pretty normal. We don't tend to think of people who are sad or in mourning as fortunate. But consider this. Would you rather have beloved family members and friends that you would feel sad losing, or would you rather be insulated from that and not care that much about anyone so it doesn't bother you when someone dies? Give me that loving relationship every time, even if it it does hurt when it ends. And remembering the love will bring me comfort.

You know, if you look at all of these in depth, you will realise that although these qualities are not ones our society tends to value, they will, in fact, bring us happiness, a lasting happiness, not the fleeting feeling of being happy. After all, our society, and human beings in general, don't tend to be very good at figuring out what will really make them happy. We are so in the habit of pursuing riches and honour and big houses and power and lots of respect and frankly, none of those things are ultimately very satisfying. On a larger scale, those are the very things that lead to wars and exploiting our planetary resources as if there were no tomorrow, and oppressing people and all sorts of bad things. And they don't tend to lead to happiness by any definition. Not even for the people who benefit from them, much less anyone else.

But people who are humble, and pursue justice and righteousness, and treat other people with mercy and respect, and work for peace, well, they may not reap the worldly benefits I just mentioned. But they will be living in the Kingdom of God already as its blessed, fortunate, happy members. They will have the satisfaction of feeling that they haven't wasted their lives. Their lives will have meaning. They will have the satisfaction of knowing that they have done good and made some people's lives better. That when they die, they will have left a legacy of good behind them. And people who will be sad they're gone, people who love them. And this will be true even if they are picked on for it in their lifetimes. Their lives will have eternal value, while those who hoarded riches and power and position and so on have to leave it all behind when they die.

St. Paul says in the letter to the Corinthians that we read today that God's wisdom looks like foolishness in the world. He uses Jesus as an example, Jesus who left behind the power and glory of God and was born as a poor human being, lived as a homeless itinerant preacher, and then was killed. To the world that looks like a pretty dismal life, a total failure. And yet in his life, Jesus showed forth the love and grace and mercy of God and in his free offering of himself, he offered us forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. And God vindicated him by raising him from the dead. Not such a failure after all. As Paul says, God's so-called foolishness is actually wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

We aren't the best judges of what will make us truly happy and contented and satisfied in life. We're also not the best judges of what God requires of us. The prophet Micah kind of mocks people who think they can buy God's favour. "What shall we do to please God?" he asks. "Shall we bring burnt offerings? Will God be pleased with thousands of rams or ten thousands rivers of oil, or shall we give our firstborn in sacrifice? No!" he says, "God has told you what he requires of you: do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God."

Kind of sounds like Jesus saying, "Hunger and thirst for righteousness, show mercy, be meek or poor in spirit before God." God doesn't require us to be great in the eyes of the world, or powerful or rich or any of those things. God doesn't require us to endow a charitable foundation with gobs of money. God requires us to act justly, fairly in our lives, to be kind to people, and not to get puffed up and start thinking that everything is all about us, but to be humble before God, acknowledging our full dependence on him.

And if we do these things we will be living already in the Kingdom of God. And we will be happy, or blessed or fortunate, however we may feel at any given moment. We will be living a satisfying and fulfilling and worthwhile life, full of God's love, full of love for one another. We shall see God, everywhere and in everyone. We shall be comforted. We shall inherit the earth, in fact, we'll become the salt of the earth. People shall call us children of God, or sometimes even angels of God. We shall be loved by those whom we love, they shall rise up and call us blessed. The Kingdom of Heaven shall be ours, indeed is already ours. What more could we ask?