

Matthew 5:1-12

Beatitudes

The Sermon on the Mount, as it is called in the Gospel of Matthew, begins with a set of appositions called Beatitudes. The poetry and the substance of the Beatitudes is powerful enough that knowledge of them has a life of its own, they are known beyond the faithful. They make the astonishing promise of a happy or blessed life and not just in the life to come, but in the here and now.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” speaks of the distinction between the religious idea of paradise and the much more modest reality of an imperfect earthly life. It speaks of a reversal in which the powerful elites in this life trade places with their humble neighbors in the next.

“Blessed are those who mourn and the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” are not only associated with this reversal, they also envision a set of values to live by, wherein the lesser things of earthly life are cherished.

“Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart (which means, those who are good for the sake of it, simply because they love goodness), and the peacemakers,” confront us with the enigma that there is a sense of fulfillment in this life that has nothing to do with worldly success, wealth, power, pleasure, status or any other

means by which we measure happiness. They teach us that the envisioned values of the Beatitudes stand opposed to the values of the more modest reality. So that, “blessed are those who are persecuted,” reminds us of that opposition and warns us not to feel too much at home in this life because the truth is that we are strangers and aliens here.

While My Guitar Gently Weeps

I have always experienced difficulty falling asleep at night. Even when I was a child I slept with toys in the bed (mostly little Hot Wheels and Matchbox Cars) so that I had something to do while I waited for sleep to overtake me. As I got older I listened to the radio. I had a clock radio with a sleep function, a button I could push so the radio would turn on and play for an hour so that after the music serenaded me to sleep and was no longer needed the radio would turn off and there would be silence.

I remember the “classic” rock era and some of the songs that I listened to as I fell asleep. There was a lesser known Beatles song that sometimes played and was also on a “greatest hits” album I somehow had in my little collection of records. It was called, “While My Guitar Gently Weeps,” and the first line was, “I look at you all, see the love there that’s sleeping, while my guitar gently weeps.”

And even though not every line in the song made sense that statement rang true and it still rings true today. There is a tragic side of human life that is characterized by misplaced values, by a lack of humility, and an inability to be saddened by other people's pain unless it is also our own. It involves an acceptance of injustice as long as its affects are mostly on other people, and a willingness to disregard the plight of others as long as their pain is theirs and not ours. You could say there is a great deal of sleeping love.

Rock and Roll Aliens

The artists on the radio seemed strange and alien to me. I heard stories of incredible excess, drug addictions, and indiscriminate sexual practices that made me wonder how these people could survive (tragically, some of them did not) and how they could fail to see the moral and ethical contradictions in their personal lives.

But I also saw the moral and ethical contradictions of the larger society at the time. It was the era of the Cold War and Vietnam and Watergate and Urban Decline and some of the divisions that plague us today were present then if in less developed ways. We still have threats; terrorism, racial strife, climate change,

economic unrest. I grew up in a city where the economy was driven by the threat of war and would be devastated by peace. And there is too little compassion for the suffering people in the world. I am not saying there is not any compassion, just not enough.

In my mind, I can almost see God in heaven, if you will permit me a humanization of God, sitting in a chair with a guitar, overlooking the mess human beings have made of things and playing a sad song at the tragedy of our failed love, wondering if we will ever get it right.

God's Sad Song

And that is what the Beatitudes are. They are a "sad" song about what could be if we risked setting our selfishness aside and willingly took upon ourselves at least some of the world's pain.

Sadly, too few of us are thus willing, and the ones who are willing are often left traumatized by their experience, because they find too little support. It is hard to suffer and rejoice at the same time. One can hear the sound of gentle weeping.

Waking Up

The weeping guitar may be seen as a metaphor of God's long-suffering patience for the waking up of our

love. The Beatitudes, though they have a sad quality about them because they speak of the reality of mourning, and the lack of righteousness, of the need for mercy and purity of heart; they speak of the lack of peace and the reality of persecution; yet they are essentially joyous and hopeful because they promise happiness and blessedness in this life and in the next. They speak of it as a reversal. Ironically for Americans who have been taught to value the pursuit of happiness, they teach us that it is impossible to achieve happiness by pursuing it. The one who seek life, loses it.

God is graciously waiting for us to willingly wrap our minds and our hearts around the truths expressed in these lines:

that fulfillment in life does not come from material things; that arrogance and hubris lead to ruin and stand opposed to meekness and humility which lead to health; that sadness about the pain of the world is a blessing that leads to happiness; that authenticity is possible in life. And though they stand opposed to popular trends in a materialistic culture of success and pleasure, to the point sometimes where people who practice them are persecuted, these ideas are the source of joy and meaning in life. And they are also the foundation of healthy relationships.

Rejoice and Be Glad

You can read them for yourself. Let their song ring in your head as you wait for sleep at night or when you wake up in the morning or as you go along your way. Accepting Christ means falling in love with these ideas; serving Christ means making sacrifices to help bring them about out of love and patiently waiting as the habitual selfishness in our nature is slowly excised and the song in our hearts gets stronger, and as it changes from the sound of gentle weeping into the loud and glorious sound of rejoicing and gladness.

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