

A LIST FOR LOSERS

JUDITH B. BRAIN JANUARY 29, 2017

TEXT: MATTHEW 5:1-14, MICAH 6:6-8

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### **INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE**

Our reading is from the Sports Pages of the local newspaper .... the holy text was opened and the lesson for the day was read.

- Blessed are the strong for they shall make it to the Superbowl.
- Blessed are the quarterbacks for they shall be adored.
- Blessed are the champion athletes for they shall command salaries in the millions.
- Blessed are the season ticket-holders, for theirs is the privilege of gloating.
- Blessed are you when you wear the Superbowl ring, for you shall be considered a hero forever.

I think that is a reasonable approximation of what our culture considers valuable and blessed. In fact the events of the last year pretty much summed it up. It's all about winning! We aspire above all things to be winners; we revere winners.

It wasn't much different in Jesus' day. Power, fame, wealth, and triumph in competition were all valued in that period of the Roman Empire. As for religion, it didn't help. In another parallel to today, a core teaching of Jesus' own religion was that wealth and success and good fortune were evidence of God's blessing.

The Biblical Beatitudes are our text today. If they sound strange to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they were, perhaps, even more alien to Jesus' contemporaries. Can you imagine the ragged, hungry, peasants scratching their open sores and listening to Jesus speak this nonsense?

### **THE BEATITUDES ACCORDING TO MATTHEW 5:1-12**

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

### **THE TROUBLESOME BEATITUDES**

The Beatitudes are at the core of our faith. Volumes have been written in efforts to interpret them. But how much interpretation do they need?. They say what they mean. The problem is, they don't make much sense.

Oh, you can squeeze meaning out of them if you believe that they claim that suffering will be rewarded in the afterlife. But that is not the intent. When Matthew uses the word "Heaven" he doesn't mean the hereafter, he means God. Matthew practiced the Jewish taboo of never writing the name of God so "heaven" is code for God's realm. "Great is your reward in God's economy, *now!*"

### **THE TRUTHFUL BEATITUDES**

A colleague of mine commented on the many posters he's seen ... the Beatitudes written in flowing calligraphy superimposed on a sunset. He says, "That's completely wrong. This is a subversive message. They should be scrawled in graffiti on the dark walls of alleys or on railway bridges."

The Beatitudes tell us that God's favor abides with the meek, the mourning, and the poor in spirit. This will not come as a surprise to many of us. We know this because we have experienced it. A friend wrote: "My personal beatitude came out of the worst period of my life. It is this: "blessed are you who have lost someone you love, for then you will really know what true love is." She found a depth of compassion and love in God when her husband died. The famous preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, dated his rebirth from his nervous breakdown. He became a more effective as a pastor when he no longer depended on himself but trusted God because he could not rely on his own capabilities.

So yes, we can find ourselves in the Beatitudes. But we also know that there is another level of meekness, mourning, and desperation of spirit that deserves our attention. We have seen them reviled on our television screens; we have watched their bodies lie wounded in the streets, we have seen them blown away in terrorist attacks, we can't escape images of them carrying bleeding children as they seek refuge from war, we drive by them as they hold up signs at the Fresh Pond intersection.

These are the beloved who are close to God's heart. The Beatitudes are a statement about a compassionate God who pours love and blessing on the nobodies and the sufferers. The Beatitudes are about "God's preferential option for the poor" as liberation theologians would have it. This is the kind of God I want to believe in....and I *do* believe in. This is also a God who calls me to do the same.

#### **THE COMMUNITY-DIRECTED BEATITUDES**

I love this passage in Matthew. First Jesus takes this improbable lot of underdogs, he blesses them, and then tells them to flaunt it.

#### **SALT OF THE EARTH, LIGHT OF THE WORLD      MATTHEW 5:13-16**

*"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.*

*"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

Isn't that a little ironic? You could understand it if Jesus were talking about the powerful church of Constantine or about the bishops that controlled kings and nation states in the Middle Ages. But no, who does he call the "light of the world?" Exactly those meek, downtrodden ones—laborers, street people, a slightly shady IRS agent, the meek, the mourning, the poor in spirit, the persecuted, the walking wounded.



In some ways, this is very good news. It give us no excuse. If these ragged peasants can be named “the light of the world,” how can we not answer, “Me too! Me too!!?”

Are we better prepared? Less wounded? More moral? We may be richer in things and we're probably not meek, but are we any more suitable to be disciples? Probably not. And the words are for us anyway. They send us out into our daily living to be Christians in a social context. Being salt and light is about being in relationships. John Wesley says, "Christianity is a social religion. To turn it into a solitary religion is to destroy it."

The Christian faith is not practiced in church. Church is where we are prepared for the actual living of the Christian life. Church is where we come together to allow God to heal us, encourage us, and remind us that we are blessed, so that—for one more week, at least—we are ready to be salt and light.

### **PRACTICING OUR FAITH**

It was that dread daylight savings time shift and a young church member arrived just as the congregation was leaving.

"Oh no, I'm late," he panted. "The service is over."

"No," replied a woman coming out of the door. "It's just beginning. Now we're going out to do it!"

Let's be conscious of our humble calling this week. We don't have to do big things. Jesus didn't say, "You are the earthquake, the storm, the blinding flash of lightning." Jesus is not asking for drama, for the grand gesture. No, you are salt and a candle. Just necessities—a metaphor for the integration of faith with daily practice.

Remember, tears are salty. Perhaps we need do nothing more than cry with a friend. Or will we bring a bit of light by calling someone on the phone? Or enhance the flavor of the lunchtime conversation by questioning the dehumanizing atmosphere at our office? And let us not forget that blessed gift people of faith bring to the world . . . that is prayer—an offering of light we can make every day.



Oh that darkness seems so dense now. What can be done to shed a little light. Well, we've got our recipe. Go back to the passage from Micah that Eliza read.

*God has told you mortals, what is good. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.*

### **BENEDICTION**

There is a church with a sign on the sanctuary door just as you are leaving. It says "Servants Entrance." Yes, as we leave this place, we are entering the world to serve God and our neighbors. So go forth this week to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. Let your light shine. Amen