

August 26, 2018

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift
"The Blessing in Name-calling"

THE READING - Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus* saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

5 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

7 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

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

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely* on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

SERMON

Name-calling – there are different kinds.

When we were growing up, in fun and affection, my sisters and brother would call me: "Jeanie weanie, green string beanie." There was no meanness in this, and to this day, we laugh over it.

School will be starting this week, however, and we've all become aware of the problem of bullying. It often starts with name-calling.

And on the world stage, name-calling can take a devastating form. In the case of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, a political leader incited the Hutus to violence against the Tutsis by calling them by the dehumanizing term "cockroaches."¹ Language matters! So it was regrettable in my opinion when this past June our president in two tweets likened immigrants at our southern border to an "infestation."²

Yet, Jesus says: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." **This morning, I am wondering where the blessing is in name-calling?**

This final beatitude in Matthew's version is not arguing that it is a blessing in and of itself when others call us names. There is no blessing in reviling or persecuting others for who they are and what they believe! He doesn't condone this behavior, but Jesus acknowledges that violent words and actions are a common part of life. After all, Roman forces occupied his nation, ironically referring to themselves as "peacemakers," and to their emperor as "the son of God."³ It is in this context that Jesus uttered these words of counter-cultural blessing. Plus, his own people judged each other harshly, according to class, social standing, and religious purity. Given their resistance to the prophets before, Jesus prepares his own followers to expect persecution.

But he does not instruct them to respond in kind, as tempting as it is to do so, because the standard of their behavior is higher. The Beatitudes are based on the "Reign of God" and "God's righteousness." Notice that these terms apparently intentionally start and finish Jesus' list of blessings: the first beatitude says the reward for the poor in spirit is the kingdom of heaven, and this is true for the eighth – those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.⁴ This rhetoric means that what should matter to us as his disciples is what God is going to do in the future, what God thinks of us now, and *the name by which God calls us.*

When Nelson Mandela was imprisoned, some called him a "Communist" and a "terrorist." After twenty-seven years of incarceration, he reached for a higher ethical bar. Mandela said: "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I

¹In 1992, when he was an official in Rwanda's ruling Hutu party, Leon Mugesera, made a speech against the Tutsi minority, describing Tutsis as "cockroaches" who should be killed and their bodies dumped in the river. Mugesera fought extradition from Canada, but was jailed for life in Rwanda in 2016.

²June 19, 2018 and July 3, 2018.

³M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 180.

⁴W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 48.

knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd *still* be in prison."⁵ And as the President of the new South Africa, he became a galvanizing force for national unity, reconciliation, and peace.

So Jesus understands what we are up against! The Beatitudes are not pie-in-the-sky idealistic sayings; they are designed for the real world and are practical; he intends that they be practiced. As G.K. Chesterton wrote in 1910: "Christianity has not been tried and been found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."⁶ Therefore, in this teaching, Jesus provides not only the ideal, but also a *method* for meeting the divine standard.

Look to his beatitude in verse nine; it relates to those following. Here we find the way to blessing: **Jesus points us to the art and hard work of *peacemaking* as the means of responding to name-calling and even persecution. Peacemaking.**

I recall a scene in the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which six-year old Scout Finch is on her way to becoming a bully. In her first day at school, she gets into a fight with Walter Cunningham, calling him names and wrestling him to the ground, because she got into trouble with the teacher over his not having money for lunch. Her brother, Jem, pulls her off Walter and, to her consternation, invites her enemy to *their* home for dinner. Around that table, with their father Atticus and chastised by their maid Calpernia, Scout is coached in peacemaking, and eventually she and Walter get past their differences to a genuine friendship. **They get to experience God's blessing in name-calling!**

No doubt, you and I are left with questions and "what abouts," because there is much more to learn about how to make peace than can be addressed in the second half of a single sermon, especially in more complicated and global situations! May it suffice this morning to offer three marks of authentic peacemaking: 1) peacemakers do not escalate the conflict and return aggression for aggression; 2) they face those that harm them, rather than run away, and with courageous, realistic, compassion; and 3) peacemakers hold themselves open to the possibility of conversion, to forgiveness with accountability, and even to reconciliation. They know that there are no guarantees, but they *actively* pursue peace by God's grace.

Returning to the story of South Africa, Bishop Desmond Tutu was appointed to the tough challenge of presiding over the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for this newly established nation. In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu speaks honestly about the strengths and weaknesses of this "third way" they chose to deal with the horrors of Apartheid and to reach for personal and national healing.

He tells the story of Lucas Sikwepere, who Cape Town policeman, BCJ Barnard, shot in the face, blinding him. Telling his story before the Commission, Lucas said: "it feels like I have got my sight back by coming here."

⁵I think that this quote is from Mandela's book, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 1995, but I couldn't nail down a footnote.

⁶G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, 1910.

Tutu also describes how the parents of Amy Biehl, who had been killed by a mob, were at first shattered, and later, decided to support the amnesty applications of the murderers of their child. Eventually, they set up a foundation for lifting up youth in the very township where she had been killed.⁷

I think these found the blessing.

These and other peacemakers experience God's blessing, because in situations of name-calling and persecution, they are thinking of God as their parent, their enemies as estranged siblings, and they long to hear God call them by the name "Children."

Blessed are *you*, Children of God!

⁷Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 167 (Lucas) and 152-153 (Amy).