

Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
August 8, 2010

Sermon Meditation on the Beatitudes  
Matthew 5:1-12

The week before last I attended a week-long retreat for pastors at the San Francisco Theological Seminary. We worshipped in the morning and evening. In each worship service one of the Beatitudes was read twice followed by 10 minutes of silence. I am going to simulate that experience here except Tani will read one of the Beatitudes twice and we will be silent for approximately half a minute after each reading. You may close your eyes during the time of silence. Thereafter, I will comment very briefly on the preceding reading and Tani will read the next Beatitude and so on. Suellen said it would be lovely to hear your insights but unfortunately we do not have time for that. Please share them during the refreshment and fellowship time. Let's begin:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the realm of heaven. [Repeat]

[Silence]

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the realm of heaven, in other words, blessed are those who know their need of God, for theirs is the realm of heaven. The poor in this context are the needy ones of Israel who prefer divine service to financial advantage. Their poverty is real and economic, but with a spiritual dimension. "In spirit" changes the emphasis from social-economic to personal-moral: humility, detachment from wealth, voluntary poverty. In the Bible economic destitution is an evil to be corrected and wealth is not an evil in itself, indeed it is a necessity for the well-being of the dominion of God, but it risks neglect of God and of the poor. God's first priority is the care of the poor.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. [Repeat]

[Silence]

Blessed are the sorrow bearers. We cannot be comforted if do not bear our own and another's sorrow. Grieve your loss (that in itself is cathartic) and trust that when your grieving gets heavy God's Holy Spirit, the Comforter, and your sisters and brothers in Christ will comfort you. Matthew's readers mourned to see evil reign on earth (originally, over Israel).

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. [Repeat]

[Silence]

In a "Ziggy" cartoon, Ziggy is sitting at the desk of his loan officer. The officer looks up from reading Ziggy's application and says: "...we'll have to have more collateral than the fact that you expect to inherit the earth!" I asked Judy Siker the New Testament professor

at the retreat what “meek” meant. She said: The meek are the marginalized. So the marginalized will inherit the earth. That doesn’t make sense. I thought the wealthy inherited the earth. Liberation Theology speaks about God’s preferential option for the poor. The meek inherit the earth when the wealthy share their goods. Goods are sisterly and brotherly love, education, economic empowerment, advocacy and support.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. [Repeat]

[Silence]

In scripture, righteousness and justice are interchangeable. A right relationship with God issues in concerns for justice which is a fair shake for everyone. The Beatitudes are practical.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. [Repeat]

[Silence]

Mercy refers to the pardoning of one’s neighbor, to love, especially of the needy, and even of one’s enemies. All vengeance is excluded. Who needs our mercy, to whom are we giving it, and are we receiving it? Do we expect mercy without giving it?

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. [Repeat]

[Silence]

Will the pure in heart see God in this life or in the next life? Pure in heart stands close to justice and means loyalty to God’s commands and sincere worship. We see God in this life because eternity is now.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. [Repeat]

[Silence]

Peace in this context is based on the Hebrew biblical word “shalom,” a many-sided concept involving total well-being. This is the scripture I heard on the morning of my first day as a citizen of the United States of America. The day before President Barack Obama welcomed me into the American family and as a Bible-affirming peacemaker God welcomed me as a child of God. What does this mean as I live out my citizenship in this country? What is peacemaking for all of us? In this biblical context, it is peace within ourselves, within our homes and neighborhoods, within the community, country and world. It is a desire for peace in Iraq and Afghanistan and peace and healing for our environment.

The final two Beatitudes are:

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

We didn't reflect on these Beatitudes. Persecution is not standard fare for Christians in the USA although Christians who have spoken and lived Christ's message and stood for peace and justice in very historical context (Martin Luther King Jr. and Bishop Oscar Romero in ours) have been persecuted. Romero, the El Salvador Archbishop who was gunned down saying Mass, said: "Even when they call us mad, when they call us subversives and communists and all the epithets they put on us, we know we only preach the subversive witness of the Beatitudes, which have turned everything upside down." The early church was persecuted for their witness to Christ. In life and death these martyrs are blessed and their reward is in great in heaven.

"Blessed" in some translations is "happy." We are happy and blessed when we live the best we can this great teaching and practice – the Beatitudes of Jesus. Amen.