



The New England Church Pulpit

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IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITIES

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Matthew 5.1-12

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

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

Blest are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blest are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

Blest are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

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

Blest 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.

These words from Matthew's Gospel from the Sermon on the Mount, known as the Beatitudes, are some of the most cherished verses in the bible. But what are we to make of them? They are lovely; they are poetic; and lyrical. But they are provocative in the extreme, inviting us into a world of alternative living, which is quite different than a world of alternative facts.

The Greek word that is most often translated "blessed" is much more robust than the implications of our English word. "Blest" is a better translation, connotating as does the Greek, the concept of deep satisfaction, contentment, profound gratitude.

Theologian Charles James Cook says he is "struck by their poetic beauty and overwhelmed by their impracticability in our world." The great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called them an "Impossible Possibility." (Both quoted from a sermon by Dr. John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, "Blessed Are You," February 6, 2011)

Author Kurt Vonnegut said that if you want to discover the meaning and potential of human life, you might start with Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes. "That one about the meek inheriting the earth," Vonnegut said, "is the best idea anyone ever has. Vocal Christians, often with tears in their eyes, demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. I haven't heard

anybody demand that the Beatitudes be posted anywhere," he wrote ("Cold Turkey," In These Times, from Fourth Pres)

The reason is that while they are poetically beautiful, they are radically subversive. As subversive as those inimitable words of poet Emma Lazarus on Lady Liberty of Ellis Island fame

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these the homeless, the tempest-tossed to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

The Beatitudes of Jesus challenge, head on, the values and ethical structures of the world in which we live. You don't get ahead in this world by being poor in spirit, or poor in anything, John Buchanan reminds us. The defining value of a consumer culture is to not be poor but to earn, to buy, to accumulate, to consume. The meek don't get anywhere in this world; the aggressive do. Christians believe, as Buchanan says, that while bullies in politics, businesses, or community may win today, at the end of the day it will be peace and justice and righteousness that will prevail. We believe it, even in the face of contrary evidence; we bet our lives on it, are willing to be fools for Christ for it, and sometimes suffer and die for it, as did Jesus. He went to his death, not cursing those who drove nails in his body and hung him out to die where the crows and jackals could pick the flesh off his bones, but blessing them, which was the ultimate power of love.

The church was located in a small town in Connecticut, next door to a group home for adults. One day one of the residents of the home, Hattie by name, came to church. Painfully overweight and wearing clothes that didn't fit, unbathed and unable to breathe or move comfortably, Hattie wouldn't speak or make eye contact with anyone. From the beginning she tried the patience of the minister and the congregation. She often forgot where she was and lit up a cigarette right in the sanctuary. Her medication prevented her from being alert most of the time, so she fell asleep during sermons, snoring loudly, each Sunday.

The conversation among the leaders of the church was predictable: "She doesn't belong here; she couldn't possibly be getting anything out of the service. She shouldn't be allowed to ruin it for everyone." Some observed that she ate too many cookies at coffee hour, and the church was naturally worried that she would be a deterrent to visitors.

Finally, one exasperated council member said that she'd had enough of all this talk, and announced that she would make a friend of the troubled visitor and would hereafter be sitting next to her in church. This was quite a sacrifice, you understand, for this meant she had to move from the pew she had been sitting in for over 25 years. Do you know how difficult that, in and of itself, would be? But she did. And when the snoring started, she gave a gentle nudge; she helped Hattie find the right hymn to sing; she reminded her to put her cigarettes away and limited her to three cookies afterward.

That was all it took for Hattie to make changes. Soon she was talking to other people, making eye contact, shaking hands, and speaking her first words to the minister which were, incidentally, "bless you."

The social worker who had been working with this woman called to say that Hattie had never been accepted by any group or able to sustain a single positive relationship until she started coming to that church. "Thank you for welcoming her," he said. "Your church must be an exceptional church." Exception, indeed. Subversive even. Radical in its love and transformative in its actions.

Empowered now, Hattie went on to make friends with the others in her group home and brought them all with her to church. She had gained her life back. The minister reflected: Why should this be an exceptional quality in a church? Who is powerless and who is powerful? Hasn't God chosen the powerless in the world to be powerful in faith?"

(Erica Wimber Avena, East Lyme, CT, Christian Century, January 4, 2017).

Perhaps we love the Ten Commandments more because they play into our judgmental mentality, making us feel self-righteous at the expense of others. The Beatitudes, however, undermine our cultural and social customs that normalize getting ahead, winning, of being wealthy and powerful at the expense of others. The Beatitudes are subversive ideals that cut to the heart of a society that values wealth more than integrity, power more than caring, and hubris more than humility.

The Beatitudes call us to a transcendent purpose in life that is radically different from what the world relentlessly tells us. We are not defined by how much we have, how much wealth, power, and influence we have accumulated. We are not defined by how beautiful or handsome or successful we are; we are defined, finally, by how well we love.

Jesus said that we are blest when we love enough to become poor in spirit, humble in mind and heart, enough to experience the pain and grief of others. We are blest when we hunger and thirst for justice and fairness in the world so much that we can taste it. We are blest when we speak up and vote and invest our resources in causes that bring peace to this world, that protect our environment and natural resources, even in the face of insult and derision and unpopularity.

The distinguished novelist Walker Percy wondered if it is possible for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses a plane; someone who is not once present for life, so life passes as a dream. Jesus didn't want his friends to miss their lives, so he told them what real life looks like. He wanted them to know the truth, didn't want them to sell out to half-truths or alternative truths, no matter how immediately attractive. So he told them God's truth: blest are the people who reach across barriers of race and religions and politics and gender and sexual orientation and theological preference and ecclesiastical history, and who sit on the other side of the sanctuary to befriend a soul who was also missing her life.

We come to church week after week to be reminded in our singing and praying, in our sermons and coffee fellowship, and rubbing shoulders with those with whom we sit that Jesus told the intriguing truth that we are blest. And indeed we are. This is why we support this church because here we can confront the truth of the way the world should be, which is not the way it usually is. Here we practice being change agents for impossible possibilities; from here, we take them out into the world to live in a way that doesn't allow life to pass us by. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

(In gratitude to Rev. Dr. John Buchanan for his sermon "Blessed Are You," from which my sermon borrows heavily.)

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God who dwells in high places beyond our understanding yet deep within our hearts, we come on this day of our annual meeting to give thanks for this company of friends who support and encourage us, who hold us to accountability, and challenge us to be courageous in the face of difficulties. For 159 years we have held forth in this community, standing boldly against slavery as members of this church risked their lives to transport those in bondage to freedom. We have partnered with people of other faiths that are radically different from our own to witness to the unconditional love we feel called to embrace. We have resettled refugees, fought for the rights of people who were cast aside by systems that oppressed and ignored, stood in solidarity with the underdog, and otherwise tried our best to advocate for victims of gender inequality and orientation. Sometimes we have failed in our aspirations; other times, by your grace, and even despite our selfish ambitions, we have succeeded. We give thanks for divine strength to renew our commitment to love as you have loved.

We are in a very strange land these days, a nation where we believed shared values honored even those with whom we disagree and welcomed those huddled masses who are fleeing persecution around the world. Now those people are being barred from entering the country where they live, where they are citizens, where they come to seek freedom from oppression and death. Give us courage to stand for what is right and to do our part to right what is wrong.

We are in a very strange place in our church history where the lack of finances threatens to undermine our future. We've been here before, and we have not only survived, but have thrived after the difficult days of budget deficits. Even as we hear the words of Jesus who honored the meek and the merciful, the hungry and the heartfelt, the poor, the peacemakers, and the persecuted, we rise up again, refreshed in our resolve to be a caring church for thinking people, so your light will shine in the darkness of these days.

Give to those who are ill and those who are discouraged, your spirit of hope. Give to those grieving and those knocked about by life's difficulties, your word of eternal love. Inspire us this day to be the body of Christ who reaches out to those Jesus loved, namely the whole world. In the name of the Christ, Amen.