

Jesus' Beatitudes: Heavenly Wisdom to Chart Our Reset

Matthew 5:1-3 ~ Matthew 19:16-22

"Blessed are the Poor in Spirit"

June 28, 2020 ~ 1st in 8-Sermon Series

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Today, we are beginning a summer trip together. Without packing a bag or dealing with any of the current challenges that traveling safely present. Today, we are departing on a journey on a different road than the lectionary-based preaching to which you are accustomed. We are launching on an eight-sermon series based on just nine verses of scripture. I will warn you the more we look at them, the more we will see how shocking and paradoxical they are. And how at the same time Torah-true-to-the-bone traditional they are. I'm talking about Jesus' Beatitudes, as they are recorded in Matthew's Gospel. You may be thinking, "Eight sermons on the Beatitudes? Why now, Pastor?"

That's a great question that brings to mind last week's episode from the "Code Switch" podcast, titled: "Why now, White People?" I see a connection between both of these "why now?" questions. Let's start with the "Code Switch" question. Why are white people across the land just now waking up to the injustice and sin of systemic racism? George Floyd's murder, on May 25, was not the first of its type. Six years ago, in 2014, Eric Garner's murder, also caught on video, in broad daylight, while in police custody on suspicion of a petty crime, was eerily similar: they even share the same last words, "I can't breathe." But if you compare the smattering of white people in the protests following Eric Garner's death, to the droves of white people protesting across the land after George Floyd's death, even in rural areas that are alabaster white, black and brown persons of color are understandably asking, "Why now, white people?"

These kinds of deaths, this type of injustice has been going on against black and brown people since the Civil War. And before. Chattel slavery was baked into our political and economic system since its origin in 1619. So why now? Among the many reasons they found, a big one is our collective moment of vulnerability due to the pandemic shutdown. In order to contain a virus we know so little about, stay at home orders were issued that confine and constrict our accustomed freedoms. We can't just go out and about as we please. White people are not used to having their movements restricted. People of color and immigrants live their lives every day in this reality. Collective fears about the future add to the urgency. And in a season where many of our usual distractions are not available, we have more time to focus on the uncomfortable reality that these past and current injustices are not righting themselves simply by the march of time.

Why Jesus' beatitudes this pandemic and protest inflected summer of 2020? Desert wisdom will help us find our way into my answer. Desert wisdom in the form of a 3rd century monastic story you may remember, about a spiritual seeker who goes to visit one of the early desert fathers, a hermit known for his wisdom. When he arrives, the man is sitting outside his cave enjoying the sun, with his dog lying close to his side. The seeker gets right to his major question, "Why is it that some who seek God come to the desert and are zealous in prayer, but leave after a year or so, while others, like you, remain faithful to the quest for a lifetime?"

The old man responds, "One day my dog and I were sitting here quietly in the sun, as we are now. Suddenly, a large white rabbit ran across in front of us. Well, my dog jumped up, barking loudly, and took off after that big rabbit. He chased the rabbit over the hills with a passion. Soon, other dogs joined him, attracted by his barking. What a sight it was, as the pack of dogs ran barking across the creek, up stony embankments, and through thickets and thorns! Gradually, however, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit, discouraged by the course and frustrated by the chase.

"Only my dog continued to hotly pursue the white rabbit." Confused, the young man asks, "What is the connection between the rabbit chase and the quest for God?" The hermit replies, "Why didn't the other dogs continue the chase? They had not seen the rabbit." They were only attracted by the barking of the dog. But once you see the rabbit, you will never give up the chase." The thing about the monk's dog wasn't that he was better or stronger or faster than all the other dogs, but because he was the one with the core reason to run.

Friends, we need to remember, relearn, reset our reason for running this race we call life. I love the truth in that story. But I think, sometimes, even when we have seen the rabbit, even when we know we have a friend in Jesus and are absolutely committed to Christ, it's easy to get distracted, discouraged, or lured by other dogs barking after something else. Or we may simply have forgotten because other temptations, fears, or pains get in the way. We *all* need to be reminded. We *all* need to tell the story and have it told to us.

On Thursday, I got to see Margie Fornefelt in the hospital, for a brief visit with six feet between us. Between me with my mask, covering half my face and muffling my voice, and Margie, with her glasses off and hearing aids out, it took a bit before she realized it was me, her Pastor, who had just entered her room. Once we got that established, and after a little chatter about her dog Lucky, her daughter Peg, I shared a couple of Psalms with her and we said the Lord's Prayer together. Gradually I saw her 101 and ½ year old twinkle back in her eyes. After we prayed she looked me in the eye and wisely said, "Yes, we have to remember that Jesus is with us, every day. Otherwise, we can forget.

This is our year to let Matthew's Gospel open our eyes to the Jesus who gives us the reason to run the race and teaches us how to chart our course. He started teaching us about what we are lacking in Matthew 5 and continued this same lesson all the way to Matthew 25, and through to his last words of commission in Matthew 28: over and over again, Jesus is calling us to raise the society from deadness. As Sister Joan Chittister pointed out in a lecture series I attended, we talk about "the common good" – but making common cause with those who see differently than we do seems to be getting harder and harder. "We are more disunited *and* inextricably linked than ever: there are no innocents anymore. All countries and cultures are capable of the unthinkable. Is pathological individualism all we've got?"¹ She proclaimed that as Christ followers seeking the "holy grail" to chart our way towards the common good for all people: we have it right here, in Jesus' beatitudes. Jesus' whole Sermon on the Mount, is a charter of human behavior for both personal and global happiness.

Yes, the rabbit we seek is right here. Charted for us in eight beatitudes or attitudes, that are the key to enduring personal and public wellbeing. Since we will have eight sermons to ponder on and learn from them, for the rest of today's sermon, I will just talk about the word, "Blessed" and tell you a true story of a woman who embodied what it means to be "poor in spirit." First the word that begins each beatitude: *Makarios* in Greek, translated as "Blessed" The Hebrew word in the Torah, from which Jesus is preaching here, is *Ashre*.

It is difficult to translate the full meaning with one word in English: Take your pick it can also be translated as "how fortunate is/how lucky are" it has been translated as "Happy are," even, "Congratulations!" But we can get a better rendering with a whole phrase: "God is pleased when" or "God's approval rests on." Aramaic speakers have corrected us on our understanding of Jesus' meaning here. Remember Jesus spoke Aramaic, so we actually have three languages in play in our quest for getting to the core of this one word in the context of Jesus' beatitudes. The Aramaic speakers have taught us that "Blessed are the..." are assertions of what happens inside of us, by living one way or another. You want to be truly happy? Jesus is telling us that happiness comes from having a right relationship with God. All eight of the beatitudes are assertions of what happens inside of us by living one way or the other. Not a blessed, that is a rewarded life. But "bless-ed" –eight basic attributes that lead toward life. Eight basic attributes that chart the course for how "to enter life" as Jesus put it in our story with the rich man.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That is today's beatitude. What does it really mean to be, "poor in spirit"? We will continue to consider this question throughout this series. For today, I will say that to be poor in spirit is to know that all of us are all alive by the grace of God and to live in the truth that we need each other more than we could imagine. That is hard for most of us, particularly for those of us who see the world through our white privilege, while swimming in the ocean of a culture that worships individualism. Yes, "being poor in spirit" means we acknowledge humbly our dependence on God. Every day. This means different paths for each of us.

I want to tell you the story of Oseola McCarty's path. She was a true-life example of what it means to be "poor in spirit." I would say she is a counter example to the rich man we heard about in Matthew 19.

Born in 1908, a black child of the segregated South, Oseola McCarty spent eighty of her ninety-one hardscrabble years laboring for others, washing, drying, and ironing the clothes of the well-to-do in her hometown in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. When Oseola was eleven an aunt took ill, and Oseola left school to take care of her aunt. Shortly thereafter she began taking in laundry to make ends meet. She didn't stop until her eight-sixth year. Oseola never complained much about the rigors of her work or the irony of spending so much of her time caring for clothes she herself could scarcely afford. She lived simply in a tiny house her uncle had given her back in 1947, her quiet life revolving around her work, her friends (she never married), and her beloved church. She kept her Bible together with Scotch tape, she said, "so that Corinthians won't fall out."

After seventy-five years of taking in laundry for as little as two dollars a bundle—when she retired, this woman who had given so much of herself to so many, decided to give a little more. So in June of 1995 she wrote a check for \$150,000 to create a scholarship fund at the University of Southern Mississippi—a school that would not have accepted her when she was of college age because of the color of her skin—in order that deserving young people who couldn’t otherwise afford college would be given a chance to have the education she could never have. The Oseola McCarty Scholarship Fund represented her life’s savings. In the first five years of its existence, eleven students benefited from her fund and nearly eight hundred people and organizations made contributions to it. She was invited to the White House soon thereafter and a paper that covered the story did so with the headline, “Dinner with the President is Her Reward.” But, as Erik Kolbell, who was telling this story surmised, “I don’t think it was.” More likely her reward came from elsewhere, maybe in the vicinity of the 9th chapter, the 15th verse of the 2nd Corinthians she had taped up so it wouldn’t fall out of her Bible, where we read, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.”ⁱⁱ

The rich young man in our second scripture lesson, somehow knew in his bones that things were not right in his life. Jesus could see inside this man’s troubled soul, and knew that his possessions had become his “rabbit.” To be “poor in spirit” is to defy the power that things have to control our lives or to dictate who we are. Jesus went straight to the truth of what he “lacked”—a humble heart willing to acknowledge his utter dependence on God, instead of his stuff.

“Why the Beatitudes now, Pastor?” As the Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, the Stated Clerk of our denomination put it to our General Assembly at its opening last week, “It’s time to get off our blessed assurance and do something about it.” Yes, this is our summer to reset our attitude. To learn how to DO our beatitudes, together, for Christ’s sake. And for the world’s.

ⁱ Joan Chittister, “The Search for the Common Good,” lecture notes from October 13, 2018, Tom York Lecture Series, Knox Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati, Ohio.

ⁱⁱ Erik Kolbell, *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2003), pp. 37-39.