

Jesus' Beatitudes: Heavenly Wisdom to Chart Our Reset

8th in 8-Sermon Series: *Blessed are the Persecuted*

Matthew 5:1-11 ~ 2 Corinthians 4:1, 6-12, 16-18

13th Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 30, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture:

Are we losing heart? It's been a long summer. Since we began this sermon series way back on June 28, three of our dear members have joined the church triumphant: Margie Fornefeld, Ruth Voss, and Ralph Mueller. We mourn these losses that are even more difficult as we must wait the many months before we can gather here safely to honor God and their memory with *A Service of Witness to the Resurrection*, and a reception of wonderful food and conversation in the Fellowship Hall, as we are accustomed to doing.

Are we losing heart? After a summer of unrest and protest in response to the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the call to stop the repeatedly uneven application of the law to all citizens, it happened again last week—uncomfortably close to us. In Kenosha, Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back by a police officer. The violent aftermath to this shooting of another unarmed person of color, has taken us all aback in one way or another. Two protestors were subsequently shot, and another wounded by a citizen. Our hearts ache. Our minds wonder, when will it stop? How will it get better? Surely these events weigh on our already stressed and troubled hearts.

In July, the whole country mourned the death of civil rights leader and congressman, John R. Lewis. He gave his all to move our beloved country closer to its democratic ideals—specifically the equal right to vote for every citizen. And yet we face challenges around this November's election like none other in recent history, due to the pandemic and its threat to public health and safety. Are we losing heart about how we can proceed toward a more perfect union in the runup to this election?

This has been a long summer of hopes and disappointments: of hard, complicated questions that resist solid, satisfying answers. But I am here with Good News this day: I can assure you that we are not alone in this struggle. Nor are we the first ones to face such troubles. The folks sitting on that mountain listening to Jesus the day he preached his sermon on the mount; the Christ followers about forty years later, for whom Matthew wrote his gospel; as well as those church members in Corinth, so brilliantly spirited, yet boiling with controversy, to whom Paul fired off the words we are about to hear: They all lived in a world of hurt and troubles. They were oppressed politically, economically, and spiritually. And yet, Jesus told them to, "Rejoice and be glad!" What's up with that? And now we are about to hear a similar pep talk from the Apostle Paul to his persecuted members of the church in Corinth. Listen for the reason they are told not to lose heart. Ever. No matter what.

Sermon:

Have we seen the rabbit? Not our Discovery Time bunny, who has obviously experienced some sort of transformation, having sprouted wings, while masked. I'm asking, have we seen the "rabbit" who was the reason for the dog's chase, in the desert monk's story I told as we began this sermon series on Jesus' beatitudes back in June? The "rabbit" for us, is the Christ. The one who faced more troubles than we can imagine, was persecuted and reviled on our behalf and triumphed. The "rabbit" who is the Christ, gives us grounding, gives us hope and gives us perspective beyond what we could possibly know or understand, and says: "Rejoice and be glad!" Not because our lives are comfortable and predictable. Not because we are in control and get everything we want. Not because we know what lies ahead. But because the One who does know, is with us. The One who does know, is for us. The One who does know, has good work, important work for each of us to do.

Full employment in the kingdom of God! Perhaps even more hazardous than working on the front lines as an essential worker or as a teacher headed back to the classroom this week, to hear Jesus tell it. Our final beatitude tells us that persecution and suffering are in the contract, if you will, of being a Christ follower. As Jesus said in his farewell discourse to his disciples in John's gospel, "Servants are not greater than their master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you." (John 15:20). This he says right on the heels of his new commandment to love one another as Christ loves us. Love, Jesus style, is risky and costly. But we know the endgame. It is not the cross, but the empty tomb. If it ended with his death on the cross, we wouldn't be here. But we know it ends with the empty tombs: Christ is risen, indeed!

True to every other beatitude, this final beatitude about persecution is Torah-traditional, paradoxical, and a shock to our senses. When did getting rejected, reviled, or persecuted ever make you "rejoice and be glad?" As Eugene Peterson breaks down this beatitude into everyday language for in The Message Bible, "Count yourself blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even! —for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble." (Matt 5:11-12 TMB). Sounds like he's talking about what John Lewis called, "good trouble." That's definitely what Jesus got into. And it sounds like what Jesus is inviting us into.

Is he issuing a warning or an invitation? As we pray for the scientists who are working around the clock to invent an effective vaccine against COVID-19, have we neglected to take our already available "meek pill"? You know, the one that infuses us with patience, perseverance, discipline, humility, attunement, and trust. We learned in this series that being "meek" is Jesus' jam: he doubles down with not one but *three* beatitudes that shine three different angles on it: Blessed are: the poor in spirit, the meek, and the pure in heart.

Your meek pill, your daily dose of Jesus' body and spirit within you, will give you super-powers to do the "do-attitudes": to hunger and thirst for righteousness/justice; to show mercy

and forgive; and to be a peacemaker who really loves your enemies. But when you do these things: Jesus is perhaps warning and inviting and inoculating us against the blowback that is bound to happen. It is clear that this kind of “meek” is anything but weak. This kind of meek is what gets us into “good trouble.” I hear Jesus telling us: If you take a stand on moral issues and support controversial or unpopular causes: expect to be ridiculed. It will hurt, you will suffer, (as Jesus did and does) but at the same time, you will be blessed with the ultimate power of God within, as you stand on the shoulders of the prophets who put the kingdom values of Christ, first. The long line of faithful folks, remembered and forgotten, who have brought us to where we are today.

I will never forget something a friend of Bob’s and mine named Chuck Knebel, a brilliant, yet mentally disabled Vietnam veteran and poet, told me the day before I was to be ordained as a Presbyterian pastor. This was back in 1992. I remember standing at our kitchen sink, as he spoke to me on the phone calling long distance from California. Back when we had kitchen phones and long-distance calls. He was wishing me well, congratulating me, words I appreciated. But then Chuck said, three words I wasn’t expecting at all. He said, “You will suffer... You know you have been called to suffer, Laurie.” No one in my three years of seminary training, internship at a church or chaplaincy at a hospital had said that to me. At least not directly like that. It took me back. And yet, his words spoke of the truth Jesus was preaching in this beatitude. A truth not just for pastors, but for anyone who strives first for the kingdom of God.

I want to be clear about the kind of suffering and persecution that Jesus is talking about here. Self-imposed suffering just to suffer, is masochism and not at all what Jesus meant. Nor is suffering willfully inflicted upon you by another person or system: that is likely violence and abuse. What Jesus is talking about is voluntary suffering with a redemptive purpose. Suffering or ridicule you have chosen to subject yourself to in the name of Christ’s call to Divine Love and justice: that’s what this final beatitude is about.

Trying to live according to Jesus’ beatitudes is risky business. It will put us in uncomfortable conversations and places. The story goes that the 19th century American essayist Henry David Thoreau was imprisoned for protesting the institution of slavery. When fellow writer and friend Ralph Waldo Emerson came to pay him a visit, Emerson looked in at the cell and said to him, “Henry, what in the world are you doing in there?” To which Thoreau replied, “No, sir, the question is, what in the world are *you* doing out there?”ⁱ

What are we doing out here? Are we trying to chart our pandemic reset according to the path of Jesus’ beatitudes? Or are we putting our heads down, holding our breath, and hoping somehow this bad dream will magically end? So many of our habits and assumptions have been challenged or taken away, we are given a fresh chance to take a good look and see what we would like to change. There is an invitation here. Let’s be honest: there is risk no matter what we choose. Why not risk on the side of Jesus? Why not risk on the side of Love and Divine Justice. When we do this, we may lose some sleep. We might lose the blinders of privilege. But we will not lose heart.

Whatever you do, as Paul says not once but twice, “Do not lose heart.” Rather, follow your heart as it seeks to will one thing, God’s way of love, God’s will for justice. As slow and as hard and as daunting real change truly is. Whether it is breaking a personal addiction or bad habit. Or if it is something as daunting as dismantling systemic racism. Jesus is calling us to take say, “yes,” even when we don’t know what that really means. William James, American philosopher and psychologist of the late nineteenth century, put it like this, “It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all.”ⁱⁱ William James’ words remind me of what Jesus said to the rich man who asked Jesus what he lacked. This was the story we heard in the first sermon of this series. Remember what Jesus said to him? “If you wish to enter life: keep the commandments.” (Matthew 19:17) Those commandments call us to risk for Jesus’ sake.

One person who truly entered into life was Lucy Stone. I want to lift her up today on August 30, 2020—just past one hundred years since August 26, 1920, when the 19th amendment became official. We have much to learn from her life and legacy. Lucy Stone, born on August 13, 1818, was a very lone voice for the cause of abolition and for women’s suffrage back in the early days of the 19th century. She resisted faithfully the sin of slavery and the sin of disenfranchisement for women. These may seem like “no brainers” now in 2020. Of course, we all agree that these practices were clearly wrong, discriminatory and against God’s will. But in the case of women’s suffrage—it took another hundred years, thousands of other voices added to hers, multiple marches, countless prayers, multiple petitions before this systemic change occurred. Lucy was surely out of step with the value system of her age. She was regularly heckled by opponents and even ex-communicated by the Congregational Church in which she was raised. Persecution and ridicule were what she faced. Surely Lucy’s righteousness, Lucy’s willingness to suffer persecution, helped to make her country a little more right.ⁱⁱⁱ

Lucy never lost heart. Neither should we! We have seen the rabbit who is the Christ. And we have heard our marching orders. I want to close this sermon and this series with an invitation to let Christ speak to you, the words of Divine presence and purpose that you need to hear today, as we sing and pray together the hymn “Blest are They.”

ⁱ <https://bookhaven.stanford.edu/tag/ralph-waldo-emerson/>

ⁱⁱ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/william_james_137063

ⁱⁱⁱ Erik Kolbell, *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2003), p.135.