

Matt. 5:1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then 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. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

January 31, 2016

A Different Kingdom, A Different World

Matthew 5:1-12

All of us have been through some kind of new member orientation in our lives. My wife, Suzette's, three-year-old preschool class goes through a period of orientation at the beginning of each year, where they learn the rules. You walk in line; you don't run through the hall. You sit during circle time and you play during play time, and when play time is over, you put away the toys you were using.

Before you start college, you have a few days of orientation to learn how they do things. You find out their philosophy for learning and their expectations of you.

When you start a new job, it's the same thing. They sit you down and walk you through their philosophy of doing what they do; you learn the culture of that workplace. And they expect you to buy into that culture, or, you can find another place to work. They don't force you to work there, but they do expect that if you choose to work there, you share the same set of values as everyone else who chooses to work there.

In nearly 36 years of teaching and preaching on the Sermon on the Mount, and, specifically, this first section we call The Beatitudes, it finally hit me just yesterday what this is. This is Jesus's orientation class for prospective members of this new project, that isn't really new at all, called the Kingdom of God, or, as Matthew likes to call it, the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is Jesus' orientation class for new followers and folks thinking about joining. These are the basic principles, ideas, philosophy, culture, expectations and behaviors of all who would be members of this organization. This is where he lays out how this new world works he is ushering in, so that the crowds listening to him – and that includes us, because we are listening, too – can decide if this is the organization for them – and us – or whether we're going to go back to fishing or widget-making or whatever we were doing before we attended this orientation class.

My major in college was psychology, and the new-member orientation class for prospective psychologists is called, appropriately, Introduction to Psychology, where you learn the basic principles, terms, and ways of doing things. But you also learn about the heroes of psychology, people like William James, Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Ivan Pavlov and his famous salivating dogs.

When I went to seminary and took Introduction to Theology, I learned about some of the heroes of the world of theology: the apostle Paul, St. Augustine, John Calvin, Martin Luther, Karl Barth, to name a few.

You can't be a psychologist if you don't know psychology's heroes. You can't be a theologian if you don't know theology's heroes. And you can't be a Christian if you don't know Christianity's heroes; the people Christians look up to, respect above all others, place on a pedestal, so to speak. And that is what these first twelve verses of the Orientation Class on the Kingdom of Heaven are about. Jesus lists the heroes of the kingdom – the blessed ones. The word "blessed" really ought to be pronounced bless-ed, because these aren't just folks who receive blessings, they are the bless-ed ones, the fortunate ones. This isn't a list of the people we should be, any more than we should try to be Sigmund Freud or John Calvin. This is a list of those who, if we looked with Jesus' eyes, we would lift up as our heroes.

Bless-ed are the poor in spirit.

Bless-ed are those who mourn.

Bless-ed are the meek.

Bless-ed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Bless-ed are the merciful.

Bless-ed are the pure in heart.

Bless-ed are the peacemakers.

Bless-ed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Now, most of these descriptions do not need explanation. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know who those who mourn are, or the merciful, or the peacemakers, or what it means to be persecuted for living out our beliefs. The main thing about this list is not trying to understand who is being described. The most striking thing about this list is how different it is from the list of heroes in this present kingdom.

You know the heroes I'm talking about: athletes, academics, politicians, pop stars, prosperity gospel preachers who glorify power and worship wealth. Movie stars and mad men; rock stars and rotten kids spoiled so badly by their parents that they get out of manslaughter charges. Anti-heroes who Break Bad but have just the slightest excuse for doing so, these are the heroes in the Kingdom of This World.

This is the world as it is, and for all of us who feel quite comfortable here, this list of bless-ed heroes of the Kingdom of Jesus is mysterious and perplexing. In what world is being poor in spirit a good thing? In

what universe is *mourning* a thing to be thankful for? As Jesus offers his first class in seeing things through his eyes, we learn in what universe these things are to be given thanks for; and these people are to be envied as the lucky ones: the universe called the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus introduces us here to a different perspective, a paradigm shift intended to make our heads spin. In a world where violence is not only tolerated but loved, where does a meek, merciful peacemaker fit in? Let's be honest, how many of us watch boxing or those cage matches, or, and I'm going to get in trouble for this, football. We love to watch huge, hulking men run into each other at full speed, and, if one of them "gets his bell rung" we will watch the replay a dozen times. We love to watch grown men acting like 12-year-olds because they carried a piece of leather across a pretend line in the pretend grass of a pretend field as a 100,000 frenzied people think they've died and gone to heaven. I love this stuff, too, but, really, do we think Jesus is touched by the gathering of well-paid warriors who kneel in prayer before doing battle for the love of a piece of inflated leather? The Beatitudes would say he is not.

Bless-ed are the meek. Display a bit of meekness in any sport, or any business, or any school, or any political race, and see where you end up. On the bottom of the pile. But then, Jesus says the bottom of the pile is the luckiest place to be. In what world is this true, we ask? The world where a crucified king rules, that's where.

If you're beginning to find your "sea legs" on this disorienting ride through the Kingdom that feels more like Alice's wild ride through Wonderland, you may begin to understand the Beatitudes may not be Jesus' call to action, but they are Jesus' call to vision, the vision of a God who blesses the poor in spirit, the mourner, the meek, the merciful, the hungry for righteousness, the maker of peace, the pure of heart, rather than the unapologetically aggressive, the filthy rich, the popular and the powerful.

The luckiest ones, the greatest heroes, are saved for last. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, especially those who are persecuted for following Jesus. Blessed are the Martin Luther Kings who are shot and killed for seeking justice and equality. Blessed are the Nelson Mandelas who spend decades in jail for seeking the end of apartheid. Blessed are you when your friends laugh at you for thinking church is the right place to be on Sunday morning, or for having a moral code that keeps you from doing the things they do. Rejoice and be glad, for you are a hero in Jesus' eyes. And, at the end of the day, who else's eyes truly matter?

Jesus came to usher in a new world, where all of these people who seem so unfortunate and pitiful and deluded; all of these people who find themselves on the bottom of the pile will one day be seen by everyone as the heroes, the lucky ones. If you like this world the way it is, and you've found a way to win at the game called the-one-who-dies-with-the-most-toys-wins, this list Jesus gives us today is disorienting and troublesome. But if your spirit is destitute, your grief is overwhelming, if you are meek, merciful, hungry for righteousness, aching for peace, pure in heart, or rejected for living your beliefs...

Good news.

There's a new world coming where the last shall be first. May those who are last be comforted. May those who are first be troubled.

End of Lesson.