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1st Sunday in Lent

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“The World Turned Upside-Down”

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## *Matthew 5:1-12*

*Six days later, Jesus took with him. 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:*

*'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

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

*'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.*

## *The World Turned Upside-Down*

When the pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber started a church in Denver called House of All Sinners and Saints. She is a recovering alcoholic and came to her pastoral calling through her 12-step group. She has a penchant for curse words and a lot of tattoos, and her church has attracted all kinds of people, including those who never thought they would be welcome in a church. As a community, they like to say, “We are anti-excellence, pro-participation,” meaning that worship each week is led by the people who show up, so services can be unpredictable. What *is predictable*, as she shared in a recent interview, is that the congregation tends to find scripture ***hilarious***. When someone reads the day’s lesson, people don’t just sit there quietly and reverently. They laugh. Out loud.<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if that is what happened when Jesus first spoke this series of blessings we have come to know as the Beatitudes. I wonder if people laughed out loud or if they stood there staring with their mouths hanging open.

If they weren’t speechless, they might have said, “I’m sorry, Jesus, did you just say, “Blessed are the *poor* and those who *mourn* and those who are *persecuted*?”

If we really allow ourselves to hear these words as if for the first time, whether we find them hilarious or just confusing, we have to admit that these words bear no resemblance to our understanding of what it means to be *blessed*.

In last week’s sermon I mentioned Kate Bowler, the professor who had the perfect job, marriage, and new baby boy when she was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. Well, there is more to that story. Bowler teaches at Duke Divinity School, where she is a professor of the history of Christianity in North America. And her particular expertise is the American prosperity gospel, the megachurch movement whose adherents believe that God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith. In fact, Bowler’s first book, a published version of her doctoral dissertation, was titled, *Blessed*. Bowler studied the prosperity gospel as a scholar and historian; although she is a Christian, she didn’t buy in to the theology of the prosperity gospel. At least she thought she didn’t. Until she was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer at age 35 and became instantly and undeniably aware of just how much she had succumbed to the belief that we can *earn* our way to a happy, healthy, beautiful life, that we can *earn* God’s love and blessing, by getting our faith *right*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Listen to a conversation between Kate Bowler and Nadia Bolz-Weber in which Bolz-Weber makes this comment here: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/nadia-bolz-weber-the-insight-of-outsiders/id1341076079?i=1000401648230&mt=2>

<sup>2</sup> Bowler’s NY Times op-ed can be found here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/opinion/sunday/death-the-prosperity-gospel-and-me.html>

Truth be told, most of us have succumbed to this belief. After all, it is imbedded – either explicitly or implicitly – in many of our scriptures, including the Psalm we heard this morning.

*Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread... but their delight is in the law of the Lord,*

The word in this psalm translated as *happy* is a Hebrew word that can also be translated *blessed* and it correlates to the Greek word used in the Beatitudes for “blessed.” And this psalm is clear: God’s blessing comes to those who make the *right* choices, and who stay on the *right* path.

Now there are plenty of texts in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament that suggest there is more to God’s blessing than happiness and health, and that this blessing is not predicated on what we do to earn it. But none of these texts are clearer – or more disorienting – than the Beatitudes.

On an early episode of the presidential drama *The West Wing*, press secretary CJ Cregg and Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Limon meet with three members of the organization Cartographers for Social Equality. These cartographers are lobbying for the administration to pursue legislation requiring schools to use the Peters projection map of the world rather than the popular Mercator projection, created by the German cartographer Mercator in 1569. His map enlarges areas at the poles to create straight lines when you project the map on a flat surface, and this distorts the land masses on the map. On the Mercator projection, the cartographers explain, Greenland and Africa appear to be roughly the same size, but in reality, Africa is 14 times larger.

Alaska appears to be three times larger than Mexico, but Mexico is actually bigger. If that weren’t unsettling enough, Germany, which appears to be located roughly in the middle of the Mercator map, is actually located in the northernmost quarter of the earth.

“Wait, wait,” Josh says,

“Are you telling me Germany isn’t where we think it is?”

“Nothing’s where you think it is,”

one of the cartographers replies.

(And I know some of you are dying to know what the Peters projection

map looks like, so go ahead and look it up on your smartphone.) This is when they show CJ and Josh, for the first time, the Peters projection, which has fidelity of axis and position.

When the Peters projection map appears on the screen,

CJ blurts out, “What the hell is that?”

One of the cartographers responds,

“It’s where you’ve been living this whole time.”<sup>3</sup>

By the time we get to the Beatitudes in the gospel of Matthew, the writer has gone to great lengths to convince us that this is the story of God’s promised Messiah, the one predicted by the Hebrew prophets, the one the Jewish people have been longing for, the one who will overthrow the ruling powers, and set God’s people free.

But from the beginning of his life until the end, Jesus is not the Messiah the people were expecting. And, more than anything else Jesus says, it is the Beatitudes that reveal that what we thought we understood about who God is and how God works bears little resemblance to reality. ***We aren’t living in the world we thought we were.***

These blessings are not conditional statements: you are blessed **if** you are mourning or **if** you are poor in spirit or **if** you are persecuted. Instead, they are *pronouncements*; Jesus is stating facts, and these facts don’t just resize the land masses on our spiritual maps, they throw the maps we’ve been using out the window. Not only are we not living in the world we thought we were, but ***God isn’t who we thought God was.***

The Hebrew word that begins Psalm 1, the one that usually gets translated as “happy” or “blessed,” means, literally, “to find the right road.”<sup>4</sup> What happens if we view the Beatitudes through this lens? What if Jesus is saying is that, wherever you find yourself today, you are on the right road? And you are on the right road; you are blessed, because there is no circumstance where God cannot be found, no situation that God does not seek to transform through God’s mercy and love? What if Jesus is saying that blessing is not revealed by our external circumstances or appearances, but by God’s relationship with us, God’s determination to be with us, no matter what? God’s blessing is not earned because **we** do something right. And God’s blessing is not proportional to how healthy or wealthy or happy or successful **we** appear to be.

The Beatitudes claim that it is the nature of God, not to pick and choose who God favors, but to favor *all* people; even those who may look like they have been singled out for suffering, even those we think are the last people who deserve God’s blessing.

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<sup>3</sup> *The West Wing*, Season 2, Episode 16, “Somebody’s Going to Emergency, Somebody’s Going to Jail.”

<sup>4</sup> Earl Palmer, *Feasting on the Word*,

Writing about the Beatitudes, Nadia Bolz-Weber imagines Jesus offering some new, updated blessings:

*Blessed are those who have nothing to offer.*

*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*

*Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else.*

*Blessed are those who mourn.*

*Blessed are the underemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented. Blessed are the meek.*

*Blessed are the wrongly accused...and those without documentation.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.*

*Blessed are they who know there has to be more than this.*

*Because they are right. Blessed are the pure in heart.*

*Blessed are the burned-out social workers and the overworked teachers and the pro bono case takers.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers.*

*Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak.*

*Blessed are the persecuted.<sup>5</sup>*

And today, given the news of this past week, I would add a few more:

*Blessed are the families whose hearts are broken because a loved one's life has been cut short by senseless violence and lax gun laws.*

*Blessed are the ones, who cry out for peace and for justice, who march and stand vigil and write letters and protest, who dare speak truth to power.*

*Blessed are teenagers who are determined to make other schools safer than theirs and who want the world to know*

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<sup>5</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. Convergent Books, 2016.

*that no one should have to live through what they did last week.  
Blessed are those who think and pray and act to create a world  
where human beings,  
no matter their age or color or immigration status,  
are more valuable than corporate profits.*

Bolz-Weber writes,

“I imagine Jesus standing there blessing us all because I believe that is our Lord’s nature...after all, it was Jesus who ...came to us in the most vulnerable of ways, as a powerless, flesh-and-blood newborn.

As if to say, ‘You may hate your bodies, but I am blessing all human flesh.

You may admire strength and might,

but I am blessing all human weakness.

You may seek power, but I am blessing all human vulnerability.’

This Jesus whom we follow cried at the tomb of his friend

and turned the other cheek and forgave those

who hung him on a cross. He *was* God’s Beatitude—

God’s blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong.”<sup>6</sup>

For the next four weeks, we will continue to wrestle with these strange blessings that call us to a whole new way of understanding who God is and what it means to follow Jesus. Each week in worship, we will offer you some way to engage the text personally. Today, during the offering, we will pass around baskets and invite each of you to take a card. The card has a picture of a compass on one side as a reminder that being blessed is not about what you have or what you’ve accomplished, it’s about being on a journey with God and with one another.

On this journey, our compass is Jesus, God’s Beatitude in the flesh: his words, his actions, his life, which is a constant reminder to reimagine our concepts of weakness and strength, power and love. The back of the card is blank, and that is intentional.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Use it however you want.

Write your grocery list on it.

Or write down something in your life you long for God to bless.

Doodle on it during a meeting or a class.

Or make a list of people you want to forgive  
or people you want forgiveness from.

Or just leave it blank.

Whether you look at it this card every day between now and Easter or whether you throw it away as soon as you leave this sanctuary, may you know, today and every day, that there is no path you can take on which God does not accompany you, no state of mind, body, or spirit that God's love does not surround, nowhere you can go where God is not waiting with open arms to call you beloved. Wherever you find yourself today, whatever path you are on, **God is with you.** *And by that, you are **blessed.***

Amen