

If Christ Chose the Cabinet  
Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle  
January 29, 2017

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor. 1:25)

As Garrison Keillor was famous for saying, it was quite a week in Lake Wobegon. With all of the ceremonial signings from the president's iconic positions of power there was barely mention that the cabinet selection process continued and the new Secretary of Defense was sworn in. It all portends radical change. Emotions are running high as the nation further divides on a number of issues that might be categorized as justice issues.

But the reality is that events from last week are not so very different from those captured in this morning's reading from Matthew. Only history can judge which scenario will create the more lasting change. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and those who are reviled and persecuted falsely on Jesus' account. Hard to imagine how any of that works in the world of realpolitik where might is right and only the strong survive; a world that considers every contest a zero-sum proposition. But as Paul asks the Corinthians, somewhat rhetorically, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Cor. 1:20)

Jill Duffield suggests the Beatitudes are a checklist for caring Christians. Our work as peacemakers and protectors of justice for all can be wearying work. But World War II and McCarthyism remind us what happens when caring, justice minded people are not vigilant. She references Wendell Berry, a poet, activist and environmentalist, who wrote, "If we are serious about peace, then we must work for it as ardently, seriously, continuously, carefully, and bravely as we have ever prepared for war." And that goes for all the freedoms guaranteed by the

constitution. As Ben Franklin says in this morning's quote: "Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are." In a world where war is industry and many powerful people are profiting from that industry, peacemakers get killed. No wonder those who mourn need the promise of divine comfort - too often it is the only comfort they know.

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We understand Air Force One and the Oval Office are meant to convey the power of the office of the president. Similarly, the mountain where Jesus sat down would have brought to mind Mount Sinai where God delivered the law to Moses, the greatest of the prophets. Both convey images of power. Jesus' teaching, might we call it the *Greatest Sermon Ever Preached*, was every bit as radical as the words spoken last week by the incoming administration. The inner cabinet of disciples selected by Jesus were not noteworthy in any way. The proposed cabinet for the next four years is noteworthy in countless ways. The two are diametrically different.

Let me confess a certain trepidation about preaching on the greatest sermon ever preached! It has an enigmatic quality that makes it too easy to ignore as confusing; it's radical message too easy to dismiss as naïve. It also addresses such a wide range of characteristics that a single sermon cannot adequately consider it in any depth. As William Barclay contends "to hear it in its present form for the first time would be to be dazzled with excess of light long before it was finished." So I'd like to spend

our time this morning examining one or two of the so-called Beatitudes after we have done some linguistic and historical foundation building.

I will be relying heavily on William Barclay this morning whose understanding and analysis I found to be most helpful. As the earlier quote hints, most scholars believe that Matthew has aggregated or combined into a single sermon elements of Jesus' preaching and teaching from throughout his ministry. In fact Barclay contends, Matthew himself provides a number of linguistic clues that it was not a single sermon given on one particular occasion. Rather, says Barclay, "it is the essence of all that Jesus continuously and habitually taught his disciples." In support of that idea, he compares Matthew to Luke which are the only two Gospels that record the event. He finds that Luke has broken the sermon up and sprinkled it throughout his Gospel. Matthew gathers them in a more or less continuous teaching session. If you wanted to carry the essence of the Good News with you in abbreviated form, Matthew's Beatitudes would be an excellent choice.

Another scholar dubbed the Sermon on the Mount as an ordination address to the disciples. We can imagine Jesus beginning his sermon with something like: "Congratulations, I have selected you to go out into the world proclaiming the Good News. Now here is what it is and what it means." What is much harder to imagine is what the disciples were thinking at coffee hour after the Sermon! The opening verses support the interpretation that Jesus is teaching largely to his inner circle. It seems that large crowds were already beginning to form wherever Jesus went.

On this composite day as recorded by Matthew, Jesus went up the mountain presumably to escape the noise and hubbub of the crowd below. When he got sufficiently far removed from the din of the crowd he sat down and his disciples came to him. Sitting down was the accepted posture for a person of authority to teach or speak. During Passion Week, Matthew records Jesus as saying: "The scribes and

the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. (Matt. 23:2-3)" Those verses may have prompted Dr. Vernon McGee to quip that the Sermon on the Mount is known as the be-attitudes and not the do-attitudes!

One of the biggest hurdles in understanding these teachings is the meaning of the word *Blessed*. What can be Blessed about mourning or being poor in anything, let alone spirit? Barclay goes to some lengths to help us understand. First, he reminds us that the New Testament was recorded in the colloquial Greek commonly used in first century Rome. This was not the language spoken by Jesus and his followers. More than 1,000 years later that Greek translation would be translated to English. Barclay makes the interesting point that in the KJV words that are italicized were added because there was a gap in the English translation. He notes that in the KJV the word *ARE* is italicized in each of the Beatitudes. Blessed are... In other words, without the word *ARE*, the original translation from Greek to English would not be a sentence because it didn't have a verb. The translators selected by King James in 1604 solved the problem by adding one.

But Barclay speculates that the word translated as the adjective Blessed was more likely the Aramaic word found in the first verse of Psalm One which is translated "O the blessedness of". I know we are getting a little academic here – please forgive me. But I think he makes an interesting point. When Jesus says "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" he is not saying someday you'll be rewarded for your poverty. "O the blessedness of" is not a future state of being but a very present state of joy and radiant gladness.

In a similar fashion, he says the word translated as blessed was not the commonly used word for happiness. It was an exalted word reserved for a special type of *godlike* joy; a joy far beyond mere

happiness! Barclay says it is a "joy which is completely independent of all the chances and the changes of life; it is a joy which is serene and untouchable". Thus "Blessed are the poor in spirit" becomes "Blessed are those who have realized their own utter helplessness, and who have put their whole trust in God". Barclay cautions that material poverty is not what is being considered although Luke's account suggests otherwise "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the kingdom of God" records Luke (Lk. 6:20). Material poverty is never a good thing says Barclay and I agree. Isn't it the aim of the Christian gospel to eliminate poverty?

The final stage of building our foundation is to recall the Lord's Prayer which Jesus will teach his disciples just a few verses later. Barclay does this to understand the meaning of the phrase the kingdom of heaven which is implicit throughout the sermon. Christ's sermon begs the question when, where, and what is the kingdom of heaven? Barclay understands "Your kingdom come. Your will be done in earth as it is in heaven" as a "society where God's will is as perfectly done in earth as it is in heaven. That means that only those who do God's will are citizens of the kingdom; and we can only do God's will when we realize our own utter helplessness, ignorance, and inability to cope with life." The conclusion then is "The kingdom of God is the possession of the poor in spirit, because the poor in spirit have realized their own utter helplessness without God, and have learned to trust and obey."

Understanding the Beatitudes is complicated by the radical message it conveys and the challenges of translating from Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek and then into English. But Barclay's translation assures us that the Good News brought to humankind by Jesus Christ is not so much a future reward for something accomplished in this life. Rather it is a very present state of godlike joy and radiant gladness experienced by those who are fully obedient and trusting in God. We aren't talking about selective obedience. But neither are we talking about the ordinary happiness of a dish of ice cream or a walk in the park on a sunny

day – this is transcendent godlike joy. Do we imagine there are those living in this world who experience the kingdom of God; who experience that kind of radiant gladness?

Do we imagine that the refugees who are learning yet again their utter helplessness sitting on the tarmac at Kennedy airport are experiencing joy of any kind? Or those who have been kidnapped and held hostage for years in remote parts of Kenya; or those uprooted by war living in refugee camps simply trying to stay alive? Can that type of helplessness translate to joy?

The Beatitudes are Hard Sayings. If all this seems too academic; too far removed from the life we live try to focus on the transcendent, radiant, godlike joy that comes through obedience and trust; the joy that is serene and untouchable.

If you still feel unfed perhaps there is a less traumatic, more approachable way live into our utter dependence on God? Perhaps the prophet Micah, who tells of God's frustration with Israel, can point us in the right direction. "O my people, what have I done to you? And what have I wearied you? Answer me!" God says rather sharply. The prophet mimics the peoples question: what can we do to please the Lord? Does God want rivers of oil or our livestock; our firstborn children perhaps? No, says Micah, he has told you countless times. Simply "do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

Amen