

September 13, 2009
Donald Blosser

If That's A Blessing, I'll Pass
Matt. 5:1-10

David and Olive live in Portadown, Northern Ireland. David owns a small sporting goods store, and Olive is a member of the parades commission. She monitors the parades that have such deep religious-political meaning in Northern Ireland. David and Olive believe that the gospel speaks to issues of peace, love and reconciliation, and they are committed to working for peace between Catholic and Protestant. Here in Berne, that would be interesting, in Northern Ireland it is flat-out dangerous. Several years ago David's store was fire-bombed, just days after receiving a major shipment of clothing for the new fall inventory. The fire damaged the store, destroyed the inventory and ruined his computers with all his orders and accounts. It was devastating, economically and emotionally because it was clearly a targeted attack on them. The Beatitudes say: "***Blessed are you when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.***" How do you explain to David & Olive that the destruction of their livelihood is really a blessing?

Janet is an ordained minister in the church. Because of her own experiences with the love of God she is committed to working with people who need to be loved and accepted, persons who are often abused by the culture and rejected by the church. She speaks out publicly for these people, challenging the attitudes many of us have as she proclaims God's love for all humanity. Because of this, some Christians discredit her faith, they say that she does not believe the Bible, and some churches refuse to allow her to speak—on any subject. The beatitudes tell Janet: "***blessed are you when people revile you and say all kinds of evil things about you for my sake. You should rejoice and be glad.***" Janet is a friend of mine, and I just cannot find it within me to tell her that she should be glad when people tell lies about her and refuse to let her bear witness to her own faith in God.

George has lived on the edge of poverty for most of his life. He has no hope of ever owning his own home or having a reliable, relatively new car. He struggles, and life is hard for his family. Luke's version of the beatitudes tells George:

"Blessed are people like you who are poor, because you will receive the kingdom of heaven."

George doesn't care much about heaven, but he worries a lot about having enough money to pay the rent and buy food for his family. Now, with school starting up, buying shoes and school supplies for his two children presents a crisis for the family budget. Is George really supposed to feel blessed because he is poor?

This is the image that is commonly held of the beatitudes. Jesus is saying sweet things to people about having an upbeat while they are suffering. You should accept your situation quietly, & don't make the rest of us feel guilty about it.

But do the beatitudes really teach internal spiritual attitudes that you are to have, so that in the midst of your poverty, your abuse, your hunger, you discover that these horrible realities are only temporary earthly conditions, and someday in the presence of God (after you die) you will receive a blessing that will more than make up for the pain that you went through here on earth?

I want to suggest this evening that Christianity is sadly missing the point that Jesus is making because we think about Christian faith as a private, internal spiritual experience that tells us to hope for something in the future rather than to expect the love of God to make a difference right here, right now, in this life.

The beatitudes are not "beautiful attitudes" telling people to deny or ignore the painful realities of life. The good news of Jesus calls us to a new vision of mission that shares God's love with people today. We are called to do something in the name of God (because our faith is in Jesus—God's son) about the suffering, the pain, the abuse, the poverty that people experience every day. Anita said it so eloquently last Sunday: "the radical openness of Jesus reaches out to people who are on fringes of society, often rendered invisible and in-valid simply because of their own self-identity." I would add to that profound statement-- when we do that, we are not following Jesus.

Now, how do we get this from the teachings of Jesus? In the Old Testament, the Jewish faith community of God believed that God had a purpose for their lives. They remembered their experience in Egypt as slaves, they remembered a generation of hunger in the wilderness, they remembered being aliens and pilgrims for over 40 years, and they determined that it should never again be that way among the people of God. But for more than 3 centuries Israel had lived under the control of foreign nations (Egypt, Syria, and Rome). They began to believe that they were never going to experience what God intended for them here on this earth. Gradually, their faith began to focus on how the promises of God would be fulfilled sometime in the future, in a new land where everything would be exactly as God had promised. This new way of thinking about the future was simply assumed as how God would do it by virtually all the Jewish teachers and leaders in Jesus' day. It is against that background that Jesus dramatically changes the focus by talking about the kingdom of God not in the future tense---but in present tense verbs.

Mark 1:14-15, "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God" saying, "the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in this gospel." Jesus told Zaccheus "Today, salvation has come to this house". 2nd Cor. 5:17 Paul says "When a person is in Christ, there is a whole new world, everything has become new. Behold, Now is the accepted time. TODAY is the day of salvation". (Now I know that is not going to get most of you up on your feet dancing in the aisles---but that is truly an exciting message of good news, and it is crucial for how we understand Jesus.)

But American Christianity has become quite comfortable with a spiritualized faith that lives in anticipation of a future salvation. This emphasis on the future trivializes what Jesus taught about loving your neighbor, caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, and providing health care for the sick. Even worse, it quotes Jesus to support war and to promise material prosperity and health if you only have faith. The most significant contribution of Anabaptist Mennonite faith to conversations with Protestant Christianity is this concept of the present reality of the kingdom of God.

Jesus proclaimed a kingdom that has burst in upon us "right now" by the power of God in our presence. It is already here, emerging and developing all around us. It is a new reality, a new way of living, of thinking, of reacting to life, of deciding what things are really important. In traditional language, it is what it mean when he talk about the need to be "born again".

Jesus did not primarily teach doctrines and ideas (although you have to have ideas in order to carry on a conversation about what the kingdom of God means). And Jesus is not primarily inviting people to have an internal religious experience that makes them feel better when they are suffering (even though responding to Jesus is truly personal – it is your decision, and it is an experience). But this experience that is emotional, is personal and life-changing—is not just for you---but also for those around you.

That is point # 1. Jesus is talking about a new kingdom, and a new reality that is very real all around us right now---and not simply a new internal attitude.

Point # 2 follows that: The stuff that Jesus says you will be blessed for doing are not things that you decide you are going to do. You don't wake up in the morning and tell yourself: "I'm going to start my day by being meek for a while", or "I think I'll skip breakfast so I can hunger and thirst for righteousness this morning" or "I'm going to take an hour this afternoon and mourn." Don't read the beatitudes as saying: "Blessed are you people who work hard at mastering the art of being poor in spirit, or who struggle to be meek, or who are really good at being mournful, or who can get other people to spread evil lies about you, because if you suffer these things on earth, you will enjoy the good things of heaven so much more. That is like beating your head against the wall because it feels so good when you stop.

When Jesus says "**Blessed are you**", he is saying "you don't realize how fortunate you are".. so the issue really is, why are the poor, the hungry and the abused so fortunate?

Jesus is saying, there are people in the world who are poor and hungry, and life is hard for them---but they are fortunate (not because there is some spiritual virtue in being poor---that's old system thinking—it's not Christian). The reason they are fortunate is that the kingdom of God is here---and in the kingdom of God there are people who help those who are poor, they give food to the hungry and a place to sleep for the homeless---because that is just what kingdom of God people do.

Out there, in the old kingdoms of this world, when you are poor—people stomp on you, they push you aside and try to ignore you. (You remember Atlanta during the olympics—where all the homeless were moved out of the city to neighboring towns so they would not disrupt the public image of the city). That is not what Godly people do. Poor people are fortunate because the kingdom of God is here, and in the Kingdom of God people see poverty differently, and kingdom of God people see their own wealth

differently----so they share with those who are poor, they help them find jobs so they can get back on their feet and not be poor anymore. That is the good news of the gospel for the poor—that is what happens when the kingdom of God bursts in upon us.

For those people in the world who are hungry, the good news is not that someday there will be a great feast in heaven---the good news is that there are kingdom of God people all around you who will share their food with you, so that you don't have to go through another day wondering what you will give your children for supper. If you have ever had hungry children, you know that really is good news.

There are people in the world who live simply, claiming no status or power for themselves, constantly reaching out to help others. In the world, some people take advantage of them and ridicule them for being naive. But the good news is that kingdom of God people will treat you with dignity and respect. They affirm what you are doing through your simple living and generosity, and they honor you for doing it. —And that is good news.

You see, the beautitudes are not intended to convince oppressed people that they shouldn't really mind being oppressed. Jesus is telling people who are already committed to following him —people like us —here is what your faith means for the poor and the hungry who live around you. These are mission statements directed at the people of God---not psychological statements aimed at the poor.

They give us instructions on how people who follow Jesus will live, and when we live that way, the poor, the hungry, the peacemakers, the meek, those who are lied about and abused will discover they are surrounded by people of God who just don't treat other people that way. They have experienced the love of God in their own lives, and that love flows out from us and surrounds everyone around us with that sense of God's presence.

Followers of Jesus do not grab for positions of power and privilege because we think we know the truth, or because we have been forgiven by God and that makes us special. Jesus invites us to be in mission with the good news that God is here in a new way, walking with people, sharing, caring, loving, helping—because that's what Jesus did.

So, what does all this mean for us?

There are times in our lives when we experience pain, rejection, economic stress, or we get ignored emotionally and spiritually. Usually when that happens we try to hide it because we don't want others to think we are weak, or that our faith isn't strong enough to get us through the day. I'd like to suggest this evening that those feelings have very little (if anything) to do with the quality of your faith. Sometimes simply being human can be really tough. But the good news is that the kingdom of God is here. Look around you for a moment--- We are a very blessed people. You are surrounded by people who care about you. We don't always do it as well as we could, but you know each of us wants to be a caring, friendly, supportive person. Will you allow us to be the love of God with you this week when life is not fair, when you feel lonely, or stressed out with what comes at you every day. A lot of us here know what it feels like to be hurt, to be afraid, to feel alone, and not quite know how we are going to get through the week.

We know about Jesus, we are committed to being the body of Christ in this place. We have promised to help each other, so don't sneak off and hide your pain, your hunger, your fear, your loneliness. Allow us the privilege to be a sister or a brother with each of you—maybe together we can help make sense out of life.

Years ago, I had to do an assignment with Dr. Willard Krabill on death. We were to think about our own death—to describe how we would like to die, and how we would not like to die! I remember saying that I would not like to die all alone in a motel in Nebraska, where no one knew where I was, and they wouldn't find my body for 4 days until they cleaned the room. What I was saying is that I don't want to face crisis times in my life alone. I need people to walk with me, and that is what being part of a faith community means to me---it is very important.

Let me end where I started this evening. When David's store was destroyed in Northern Ireland, several congregations in Goshen formed a sort of MDS unit. About ten people went to Portadown and gave two weeks to rebuild the store. About 3 months later I received an email from David: **“Thank you so much for your help. It is so encouraging to know that we are not alone. I have never known more clearly than I do right now what it means to have the support and love of the faith community. These months have been very difficult for Olive and me, but your prayers and your words of encouragement give us hope and new strength. The persons who came from Goshen did much more than simply rebuild the store, they helped us rebuild our lives. They demonstrated the love of God in**

a way that is seldom seen here in Northern Ireland. Three months ago we were afraid and discouraged. Today we have hope and we are excited. This week we will re-open the store. We now believe this event will open new doors for a ministry of reconciliation and healing here in Portadown. Please continue to pray for us.”

That is God at work in human experience, showing those who struggle with life that there are people around them who care, because we have discovered that God cares about us...and that is good news.

Let's pray:

Loving and merciful God...we are indeed a blessed people and for that we are immensely grateful. We thank you that you have given us your Spirit, you have surrounded us with your grace. May your spirit and your presence flow through others to each of us when we are in need---and may that same presence flow through us to others around us. Thank you, dear God, for the blessings that we have received. May we be a blessing for others in your name. AMEN