

Cutting-Edge Faith

Matthew 5:10-12

Screen and television writer Paddy Chayefsky wrote a play called *Gideon*. It's about a Brooklyn Jew. Gideon is out in the desert in his tent a thousand miles from no-where, feeling deserted and rejected by God. But one night, God breaks into the tent and Gideon is overwhelmed (ravished actually), overcome, and burnt by the wild fire of God's love. Then Gideon is up all night, pacing back and forth in his tent. Dawn comes, and Gideon--in his Brooklyn Jewish accent--cries out, "*God, Oh God, all night long I've thought of nuttin' but You, nuttin' but You. I'm caught up in the rapture of love. God, I want to take you into my tent, wrap you up, and keep You all to myself. God, hey, God tell me that You love me.*" God answers, "*I love you, Gideon.*" "*Yeh, tell me again, God.*" "*I love you, Gideon.*" Gideon scratches his head. "*I don't understand. Why? Why do you love?*" And God scratches His head and answers, "*I really don't know. Sometimes, Gideon, passion is unreasonable.*"--(in Brennan Manning, *Lion and Lamb*).

The Beatitudes declare certain realities, powerful realities about God's love, and learning to be human again, learning from Jesus the meaning of God's vital blessing and presence in our lives and in the world. The Beatitudes describe kingdom people--men and women whose lives are caught up into the reign of Jesus here and now, and to come. Like Jesus, they are people who know God's love and grace. They can't help but express it to others. Like God, their--our--passion may sometimes need to be "*unreasonable*"! Now we need to remember what God is doing. He is saving the world. He has come in Jesus to do this. He has come to reveal God's love, to forgive

and reconcile us to himself, and to make the world over again. That is salvation: God-in-Christ reestablishing our knowledge and fellowship with God, our being remade as human beings-- "*Christ in us, the hope of glory*," (Col 1:27)--and the reclamation and renewal of the world. To experience these things of God, we become disciples--who follow Jesus and learn from him both God's priorities and how to live them. Those who desire to be a part of that and so engage with Jesus--that is believe in and follow him--are pronounced "*blessed*." For this kingdom thing is where the blessing of God is to be found and experienced. But notice that the Beatitudes are not only a declaration of God's kingdom priorities for the world, but also are really the traits of Jesus' own character. And with him--as he embodies the kingdom itself--we experience the realities of the beatitudes as lived out. God's salvation kingdom has begun at one level here and now with Jesus, even as it looks to greater and complete realization to come--so it is both already and also not yet.

Now we have the 8th (vs. 10) and 9th (vs. 11) beatitudes. Basically, the 9th is the same as the 8th, just restated, and then followed (vs. 12) with a reassurance of reward. So, we can treat it all as one. And here there is something of a full circle we've reached. The first beatitude says, "*Blessed are the poor/poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*." Now the eighth one says, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteous-ness/justice sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*." In other words, Jesus says to those who participate in the kingdom, like as was done to him, those who seek to follow in this kingdom way and carry out his priorities may well expect to be criticized, even experience persecution. The restatement of it--vs. 11--reinforces just that: "*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil*

against you falsely on my account. ” If you live like Jesus out in the world, if you really take Jesus’ way into the world, you may expect opposition, even persecution, threat and insult. Those who seek to be peacemakers in the way of Jesus may not always experience the peace they want here and now.

You’ll notice that with this beatitude, there is no additional action or concern specified as there are in the other beatitudes--concern for the poor, the mourners, the meek, restorative justice, mercy, peacemaking. No, it’s the identification with Jesus him-self--not merely claiming identification--but doing the things Jesus did in word, attitude, and action--that bring the criticism and persecution.

It’s very easy to praise and love Jesus. There is less enthusiasm about doing the things that he said. For Jesus said and did the things that got him criticized, rejected, condemned, and killed by the religious, social, political establishment of the time. He upset things. He challenged the social/religious/political status quo, and things people wanted. His agenda, while world-transforming, was also world-upsetting. And if we identify with him and do the things that he did in his way, we shouldn’t expect any less. But, remember this: you’re in good company, *“for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you,”* Jesus continues (vs. 12). But so as to end positively, Jesus adds, *“Rejoice, and be glad...because your reward is great in heaven.”* There is blessing to come.

It might seem odd that this beatitude about persecution follows the beatitude about peacemaking. Yet, even though Jesus was about peace, his way did not always bring peace. As he said once, *“I have not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword,”* (Mt 10:34), by which he means, his coming brings division. Not everyone

wants to side with the poor, identify with the disenfranchised and act in their behalf.

Many would rather be winners, but not meek toward others. There always seems to be plenty of money and enthusiasm for war and war implements, less interest in programs and ways of helping the poor and hungry. The call to arms against the enemy is often much more shouted for than the calm, painstaking attempts at peace and reconciliation. Not all attempts at reconciliation we may succeed. The things of Jesus and the things of the world--even the religious world--often clash and will not be reconciled. And since the beatitudes speak the kingdom values and concerns about which all Christians are to be engaged, then it goes with it that--like Jesus--we, too, may undergo rejection and persecution.

John Stott, a great preacher and biblical scholar from England, writes about what happens when we are truly identified with the beatitudes: *"Disciples are strangers in the world, unwelcome guests and disturbers of the peace. No wonder the world rejects them. Such a reversal of human values is basic to [following Christ]. The ways of God...appear topsy-turvy to people. For God exalts the humble and abases the proud, calls the first last and the last first, ascribes greatness to the servant, sends the rich away empty-handed and declares the meek to be heirs of the earth. The culture of the world and the counter-culture of Christ are at loggerheads with each other. In brief, Jesus congratulates those whom the world most pities, and calls the world's rejects 'blessed.'"* -- (Christian Counter-Culture, p. 56).

When we consider the beatitudes, all with the same beginning, *"Blessed are..."*, we are confronted with a vision, an expectation about life as Jesus lays it before us--what life is really about, the just *"one thing"* we considered before. But *"Blessed"* is not a

word we use very much, or, at least, most people don't. More in keeping with what most people think is perhaps the idea of "success." If people are happy, or are seeking to be happy, it is probably the idea of success that comes to mind. Every culture has its own ideas about success. In Jesus' time, as I have described, it would certainly mean freedom from the cruel, domineering Romans, oppressive tax collectors, and capricious soldiers, all of whom took advantage of the common people however they could. Closer to daily living, it might include savvy negotiating skills in the market place, where one bartered for everything--so as not to be taken advantage of. Generally speaking, it meant the ability--physical ability and money of course--to provide for oneself and family, and having one's family enjoy health, safety, and prosperity.

In our own time, happiness and success are desired somewhat similarly. Yet, in our society, for quite some time, along with the basic goals of health, safety, and prosperity, the additional goals of amassing as much wealth as we can, and having all the possibilities of enjoyment available to us are high on the list of many. Individual freedom is also high on the list, and for some, popularity, prestige, and recognition are very important. So-called reality-TV runs on the premise that everyone wants to have his or her day in the sun, and not just 15 minutes of fame. A glance at the rack magazines shout that men must be virile, buff, and ambitious, and women, perfectly beautiful, shapely, and competitive as well. The same magazines tell us how to have financial success, the perfect golf game, six-pack abs, and whatever else our hearts and bodies desire. In other words, we are constantly bombarded with what our life's goals should be and how they will make us happy and successful. It's important that Christians evaluate what is bombarding us, and see how that they affect our commitment

to Jesus' kingdom priorities and goals.

A Presbyterian colleague has written about this with a list of contrasts:

Our culture says, Happy are those with great prospects for marriage and work, because they will be successful.

Jesus says, Happy are the destitute, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Our culture says, Happy are those whose loved ones enjoy health, because they will not worry.

Jesus says, Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

Our culture says, Happy are those who enjoy power, because they will be in charge.

Jesus says, Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

Our culture says, Happy are people who can buy any pleasure, because they can do whatever makes them feel good.

Jesus says, Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

Our culture says, Happy are people who have power to sit in judgment over others, because they can boss people around.

Jesus says, Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

Our culture says, Happy are people who can run down their opponents by whatever means possible, because they will see victory.

Jesus says, Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

Our culture says, Happy are people who can beat their opponents, they are winners.

Jesus says, Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God's children.

Our culture says, Happy are people whose lives are lived in total freedom to do whatever

they want, because they do not have restraints.

Jesus says, Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Our culture says, Happy are people who are popular, because you will be rewarded with great recognition.

Jesus says, Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, because you have a great reward in heaven.

In the Beatitudes--and the whole Sermon on the Mount--Jesus offers a way of living and a definition of blessedness/happiness that is not what we are accustomed to hearing most of the time. Part of the problem--part of our problem, the church's problem--is that we try to fit what Jesus says into what we already have decided we want or prefer. We have our attitudes, our preferences, and judgments, and that's that! But if we are hearing what Jesus is saying, we will realize that can't be done. At least it can't be done, if we are really committed to following Jesus. We are, as Paul says, *"to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ,"* (2 Corinthians 10:5). When we are seeking to do that, we will have to think differently. Then we will act differently--if that conviction means anything.

But what Jesus wants for us--and the world--begins with a vision--the vision and practice Jesus lays out here in the Beatitudes and continues in the Sermon the Mount. It makes us frame our understanding a different way. That's why I like the way C. S. Lewis put it as I've quoted before: *"Enemy-occupied territory--that is what the world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed in disguise [as a human being], and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage."*--(Mere

Christianity, p. 51). Our Faith *declares* that Jesus came into the world to win back the rule wrested from God by human and supra-human rebellion and disobedience. How did God do this? God did this by sending Jesus as a righteous counter-revolutionary subversive to wage war against the unrighteous occupiers. With that counter-revolutionary subversive comes his invading kingdom justice for the world, and to be part of that is what Jesus is talking about here.

See! This is what the Beatitudes are laying out before us, how that kingdom manifests itself and how its witnesses take part. Indeed, the Gospel is God's gracious invitation--extended to us in Christ--to take up again our true and genuine identity and calling as human beings, as the children of God. Such who do then evidence beliefs, practices, and priorities of Christ-like, grace-filled, Spirit-motivated people living in the midst of God's Rule, even if that sometime causes division and hostility, even rejection. Such is cutting-edge faith. Yet the promise of reward speaks both of discovering God's blessing in the present and even more so in the New World to come. But often--as life itself teaches us--often, the reward IS the doing. Maybe more accurately, it is--like with God--in the loving, "*unreasonable loving*," as Gideon in our opening story discovered.

Maybe it is something of an understatement, but I think there is here truth to be derived from Robert Frost's "*The Road Not Taken*" that applies to Jesus' kingdom call:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be the one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there*

Had worn them really about the same.

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden back.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

“And that has made all the difference.”

“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven...” says Jesus. Amen.