

5:1-12

I think it's safe to say, we really don't believe those words. Oh, maybe we want to or think we should, but we really don't. Let me suggest that this is what we really believe

and think:       *Blessed are the rich, in things and in self-assurance.*

*Blessed are those untouched by loss.*

*Blessed are the powerful.*

*Blessed are those who are "realistic" about righteousness, compromising at every turn.*

*Blessed are those who demand and exact an eye for an eye.*

*Blessed are the crafty and opportunistic.*

*Blessed are those bold enough to make war.*

*Blessed are those who, doing good things, receive many accolades.*

*Blessed are those, who following Jesus, are widely praised and adored.*

If you were to phrase them by substituting "woe" for "blessed" you get:

*Woe to the poor in spirit because you will be left behind in this dog eat dog world.*

*Woe to the meek, for you will be trampled underfoot.*

*Woe to the peacemaker, for the lust for retribution is insatiable among human beings.*

And so on.

Now, I am not being a cynic here. I think we may honestly want to believe what Jesus says here in these Beatitudes, but I don't think we do. And I think that is for two reasons, at least. One, they just don't resonate with us--either with the world we perceive and live in. They are not "reality" as we know it. And two--and this may be a corrective to the first--we really haven't gotten what Jesus is really about.

So let me begin this way. I have said on other occasions, that most of us have what I call a "default" position when comes to the meaning of salvation. I define that default position as "salvation" or "being saved" is basically that Jesus came and died so that--if I trust him--I will go to be with God in heaven forever. By this definition,

salvation has to do with a final destination, as it were. One NT scholar (NT Wright) observes, *“If we make salvation about going to heaven, there is an awkward and embarrassing gap between our baptism [or conversion] and our funeral.”* Why are we still here??? Once, “saved,” why don’t we just go ahead go there?

So, NO, salvation is not--at least primarily--about heaven. So what is it about? That is, what are we to be about? It’s about becoming like Jesus, as the apostle Paul puts in Romans 8:29, *“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that [Christ] might be the firstborn within a large family.”* And Colossians 3:10-11, *“Put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of its creator...in which Christ is all and in all.”* We also hear it in Christ’s own words at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father,”* (7: 21), *“and everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock,”* (Mt 7:24). Therefore the correct default position about the meaning of salvation is our conformity to the likeness and will of Christ Jesus hear and now. What happens with us here we carry into the future.

That being said, we need to know what, if we are to be like Jesus, is the reality He wants us to focus upon so that we get what he is about. The answer is found in the phrase, *“the kingdom of God.”* This message of the kingdom is the overarching theme of Jesus’ preaching and teaching. Jesus himself sounded the announcement when he began his ministry, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven/God has come near,”* (Mt 4:17). You hear it in the first Beatitude, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,”* (5:3), and in the last, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for*

*righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,*” (5:10). The phrases “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” mean the same. They mean God--who is in heaven--his kingdom on earth,” as in Jesus’ words, *“thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven,”* (Mt 6:10). In other words, Jesus teaches us to pray for that which He, his life, death, and resurrection, and his Lordship and salvation, are about--God’s will to be done here on earth. We pray for God to act so as to save, to restore the world to the way he made it--and us, too. That--not heaven-- is by the New Testament meaning of the Kingdom of God. And what Jesus teaches here in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere--you may say--is a glimpse into what happens when God’s kingdom/ God’s Rule demonstrates its reality in our midst, in our lives, and to the world.

Let’s go back. In the book of Genesis, we see that God created humanity to live in a wonderful fulfilling relationship with him, in a wonderful world where God resided. Genesis 3 says that God “walked” with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, presenting a picture of God and humanity living together in and caring for an ideal world. Of course, the plan went awry badly, and set the world and humanity on a very different course and history from what was originally intended. But when we look at the conclusion of God’s Story--in the final chapters of the Book of Revelation (21-22)--we see that the conclusion is spoken in language of those wonderful beginning things in Genesis. When God rules over all again, the world will be made right, creation will be restored in an even grander way, the peoples of the world will be reconciled, and once again God will reside in a perfectly restored created world in that fulfilling relationship with humanity, as Isaiah 11:9 said, *“the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”* God’s will is finally done *“on earth as it is in heaven,”* as Jesus prayer teaches us.

You see, you and I find ourselves in this Story, set between an introduction in Genesis we didn't experience--though we certainly know its effects--and a conclusion in Revelation that has yet to be realized. And in this Story is the answer to our craving for meaning, place, and purpose in this world, and toward God, each other, and ourselves. It is in this Story we find what our story is meant to be about. To use some dramatic terms, the God's Great Story we find ourselves in starts in its Introduction (stage 1)--with humanity and God living in creation in unbroken relationship until the plan goes awry with introduction of disobedience, sin, and death. In the Rising Action stage (2), we see God dramatically setting the stage for the arrival of the Messiah who would, as Isaiah put it, bring in an "everlasting kingdom." In the central climax of the Story (stage 3), we see God incarnate in the person of Jesus, who came to inaugurate the Kingdom and to destroy evil, sin, and death. Then (stage 5), the Story will ultimately end with the stage of Resolution, when all things are restored and right in a yet greater way than in the beginning--creation recreated, sin and death gone, and God and humanity living in unbroken relationship on earth.

But you will notice I jumped from the 3d stage to the 5<sup>th</sup> stage. But there is a 4<sup>th</sup>. Situated between the climax of this Story that was the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the Final Resolution of the Story, is the stage of Falling Action--the things that hap-pen as a result of the Climax. And that is where you and I find ourselves and our stories. In God's Story, you and I were born into the stage of Story where the effects of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus--the central Climax--are played out as the Story continues to move to its wonderful Resolution (5). Between stages 3 and 5, we are here, caught up in the now and not-yet of God's Story, the inaugurated but not fully

realized movement to ultimate joy and resolution of everything God created and said, “Good.” We--those who follow Christ--are the people between the two most exciting parts of the Story. We have a role to play--to carry out our parts--when we embrace our places in the Story. That is what our faith and hope in Jesus Christ are about--our roles in God’s Story.

Now that’s really Good News! That’s the Gospel Truth. And ever since the cross and resurrection of Jesus, God’s reconciliation has been underway. It has begun, but it is not completed. It has been inaugurated, but is not fully experienced--but it will be in the final chapter of the Story. Until then, you and I find ourselves in the part 4 of the Story, where God is moving everything toward complete reconciliation and restoration. He is restoring, renewing, reconciling--everything. Now we have a role--a very important role, as we are invited to join in God’s reconciliation of all things. And we have a role in carrying this part of the Story forward as we move ever closer to the final chapter of the New Heavens and New Earth.

Last week, I quoted the apostle Paul when he said in 2 Corinthians 5: *“So if anyone is in Christ, there is new creation: everything old has passed away; see, every-thing has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us...For our sake he made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might embody God’s faithfulness to redeem the world,”* (vss.17-21). That is, also, what Jesus is teaching us in the Sermon on the Mount--how with and

through him, we embody the redeeming purpose of God for the whole world. We are partners with God--with our Elder Brother the Lord Jesus Christ--in bringing to reality--in so far as we can--God's Victory, God's Reconciliation, God's Grace for the world. That is what being a disciple--a follower--of Jesus means. That is what praying, *"thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"* and living the Christian life means.

So, then, when we read Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount--and to begin with--the Beatitudes, we are forced to come to terms with two realities. There is--no doubt--the reality of this world as it is, and our lives as they are. The cynical rendering of the Beatitudes I provided earlier may be cynical but they are also true to much of the world and our lives as we know them. But here's the thing: Christian faith says there is another, deeper, more profound reality. It is the reality of Jesus Christ as Lord. It is the reality of the reign of God breaking into our midst and into our lives by the power and blessing of God in Christ--indeed, a more powerful and true reality.

In this sense, the Beatitudes are a flat contradictory to the world. The Beatitudes say to the harsh reality and cynicism of the world, "NO!" By them, Jesus is declaring: *"NO, appearances to the contrary, no matter how things may seem, that is not how the world actually works. Rather, God has ordained the deep, emerging order of creation and redemption, the truly blessed are ultimately and actually the gentle, the merciful, the peacemakers, the poor. It appears to be otherwise, yes--the commonplace illusions are finally false. For there has dawned in your midst the reign of God. I know it appears otherwise, and that is why I am telling you so as to dispel the common illusions by which you think. Now, the kingdom of God being the deeper, more profound reality, get your bearings."*

That's what the Beatitudes are declaring to us. They were no more believable to those first hearers than they are to us in our own times. So Jesus' teaching requires that we really take seriously what he says. It means we must choose what realities we are going to let define us and guide us. When we look at each of the Beatitudes, we will see the Beatitudes are declarations about what the kingdom of God in our midst, they also thereby imply what we must do if we believe them to be true. They call forth from us not only belief, but action. They call forth lives that live in light of the reality, truth, power, and love of God's Kingdom come. That's what defines the followers of Jesus.

I illustrate with this true story. This was in the paper last month. It is the story of about Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds of Knoxville, TN. Seventy years after the event, he has received posthumously the "*Righteous Among the Nations*" honor from Israel, the highest honor for non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during WWII. He's the first serviceman to earn the honor. Here is why.

The article (*The Commercial Appeal*, Dec 3, 2015) reads: *The Nazi [High Command] made their orders clear: Jewish-American prisoners of war were to be separated from their fellow brothers in arms and sent to slave labor camps, where their chances of survival were low. U.S. [Jewish] soldiers had been warned that [they] would be in danger if captured, and were told to destroy dog tags and any other evidence identifying them as Jewish.*

*Army Sgt. Edmonds had been captured in the Battle of the Bulge in late 1944 and was sent to German POW camp Stalag IXA, where he became the highest-ranking non-commissioned officer held in the camp [meaning all Americans were under his command within the camp]. On January 17, 1945, the German camp commander,*

*speaking in English, ordered the Jews among the prisoners to identify themselves.*

*Edmonds knew what was at stake in that moment. Therefore, he ordered all 1000 American captives to step forward with him, and he brazenly pronounced, “We are all Jews here.”* Even with a pistol to his head, he would not back down, and amazingly, the Germans did. This story has only recently come to light but established by several Jewish Americans who witnessed it, and were themselves--with about 200 others-- saved by Edmonds’ action.

So why do I tell that story? It has to do with vision and action. Sgt. Edmonds had one reality, a very ugly reality, to deal with on the one hand with his Nazi captors. But when it came to how to act in light of his fellow Jewish-American soldiers, he had in view another reality he lived with, another deeper, more profound reality. And in light of that deeper reality, he took action--expressed by his words, *“We are all Jews here.”*

You see, even with gun to his head, Sgt. Edmonds was “blessed,” as were those with him. That’s what happens when people take seriously the kingdom of God Jesus teaches here in the Beatitudes, when they take seriously God’s Story in which we are to live out our parts. By what reality do we live day by day? Therein is both the blessing and the challenge, the challenge and the blessing, of the Beatitudes--so that as the apostle Paul says, *“We might embody God’s faithfulness to redeem the world.”* Amen.