

Micah 6:1-8
Matthew 5:1-12
Text: Matthew 5:3

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

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BLESSED ARE THOSE...

Here in the beatitudes are the first words of Jesus teachings in Matthew's Gospel. For Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses, yet the one greater than Moses. The gospel's Jewish audience would make that connection through the setting, the places and actions of Jesus being so like Moses—summoning a new nation (in Jesus' case, people from all over the region of Galilee, Syria and what we would call Lebanon). A rabble struggling to be faithful, gathered, like Moses, on a mountainside, being given a new constitution in the 'sermon on the mount.' It looks and sounds like Moses on Mt. Sinai all over again. Jesus even gives ten new commandments, each with the familiar command "do not . . ."

Commandments are imperatives: "you shall not..." but these are *beatitudes*. A beatitude is not a command to do something or not to do it. It does not urge us to change our character, saying, "If you do thus and such you shall be blessed." Beatitudes invite us to take on the conduct of whom God fully blesses. They confirm the present state of things, "Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Those who manifest these things, says Jesus, have already experienced the kingdom of heaven.

Among every congregation there can be found those who exhibit purity of heart, the peacemakers, the merciful, the meek. They are a sign of God's present blessing and an invitation to us all to become as Christ is in them.

Alexander White, one of Scotland's greatest preachers, noticed that an illustrious scientist was attending his services. He resolved that he would do all in his power to win him to Christ and his church. And so for several weeks his sermons were of the sort that would appeal to a scientific mind. You can imagine the preacher's delight, then, when the scientist declared his intention to join Dr. White's congregation. The minister asked him what had convinced him that this was something he should do. The man of science never mentioned the preacher's sermons. Instead he told of how an elderly woman spoke to him on the steps of the

church one Sunday, asking him, quite simply, “Are you a Christian?” He said that the question took him quite aback, but he replied that he was thinking about it. “Oh,” she said, “do come further in than that. Jesus Christ means the world to me.” “As I looked at her glowing face and shining eyes,” he said, “I knew that she had a secret that I didn’t have—and I had spent my life uncovering the secrets of creation. And I wanted it with all my heart.” All else, in short, all his learning and his training, he would have emptied for that moment to take in the new thing.

The beatitudes, we notice, have nothing to do with worldly notions of success. Quite the opposite, in fact. They tell us what the heart privately yearns for, what lies as the core of motive behind every seeking after, every acquisitiveness, every social or promotional climbing, every hopeless frustration at missed opportunity. They tell us of an elusive state of rest that we sense nestles innately secure in the peace of God, no matter what the outward circumstance.

I wonder, did you ever see the movie, “The Browning Version”? It was based on a work by the playwright Terrence Rattigan, and tells of an English schoolmaster, Andrew Crocker Harris, who is intensely disliked by most students. Masterfully played by Alan Bates, he is forced to retire after decades of teaching at a prestigious boy’s boarding school in England, one of those elite schools that the British euphemistically call a “public school,” which is to say, *private* (don’t ask me to explain; *The Oxford English Dictionary* obfuscates through two entire columns in order to try, and fails!)

Bates’ character teaches classical languages, Latin and Greek in the old style, dogmatically, dictatorially, depositing a core of fear and trembling in his boys that stays with them for life. When forced to retire, his leaving the school appears to generate no more than a passing blip on the school’s prestigious history. It is a passing accompanied by far more rejoicing than regret. Except for one boy who gives him a parting gift, a used copy of Robert Browning’s idiosyncratic translation of *The Iliad*. It is a gift that touches the old teacher’s heart while opening old academic sores still unhealed. This solitary gift for a life’s work becomes a sort of catalyst that sweeps the teacher into despair at the realization of a failed career, a failed marriage, and a largely failed influence. Yet, as the movie progresses we see a core of decency in this man that transcends his starched, aloof exterior.

By contrast, another, younger teacher is a rising national star in England’s great passion for cricket, and his departure to play for the national team eclipses the older teacher’s leaving, casting it into even deeper shadow. The younger teacher is enormously popular. Yet when the last scene comes on the final day of school, and each has his moment on the stage, a compelling truth emerges. The younger teacher, himself a decent human being, receives the wild applause of the school, but we sense his essential hollowness, the sort of heroic frailty that one bad

season might condemn to oblivion.

Then the older teacher steps forward on the stage and down into the hall, and he issues a wrenching apology for all his failures. In this moment, so touched with honesty and regret, he unwittingly wins the larger esteem. In a moment of naked honesty he shows that rarest of things, a pure soul, a pure heart, and so he teaches in one brief minute the finest lesson of his life, and everyone is claimed by the integrity of it. It is a moment of pure redemption, as though his whole life were just renewed. Blessed are the poor in spirit.

To show purity of heart, when all is said and done, is to show Jesus. A poor spirit, which is to say, an emptied spirit, an unalloyed, unmixed spirit, is a pure spirit. Purity of heart is a heart emptied of falsity, unlaquered by pretense, a heart confessed and cleansed. A heart so swept of hidden things that God can inhabit it.

Centuries ago, Isaac of Syria, one of the great teachers of the faith, wrote:

Blessed is the man who knows his own weakness, because awareness of this becomes for him the foundation of all that is good and beautiful. For whenever someone realizes and perceives that he is truly and indeed weak . . . he becomes all the more watchful of his soul. But [he cannot] perceive his own weakness unless he has been remiss a little, has neglected some small thing, has been surrounded by trials. . . . As long as the heart is not humbled it cannot cease from wandering; for humility concentrates the heart.

Happiness is ultimately an interior thing. But it cannot take residence until the heart makes room. Which says that the way to beatific peace is a journey upon whose road weighty burdens must be discarded.

George Buttrick says that the beatitudes are:

. . . a gauntlet flung down before the world's accepted standards. . . they become clearer when set against their opposites. The opposite of the poor in spirit are the proud in spirit. The opposite of those who mourn are the light headed, always bent on pleasure. The opposite of the meek are the aggressors. The opposite of the persecuted are those who always play it safe and compromise.

But this is not a solo journey. We are an expedition fleet, a wagon train, a company of pilgrims with a sure and faithful guide in Jesus Christ. The journey ends with the wagons emptied, the hold cleared, but the heart so full of the things of God.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Amen.