

## Beatitudes: Where are the Poor?

The lectionary text for today is Matt. 5:1-20, a passage that marks the beginning of what is known as the Sermon on the Mount, three chapters of Matthew's Gospel that Anabaptist Christians, and others, have long held to be the heart of Jesus' teaching ministry. Even some non-Christians have held these teachings very dear; Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, when he first read SM, said "...it went straight to my heart." He is said to have read the SM every day.

For a number of years FOH used the SM (Mt. 5-7) as a teaching guide for what we understood to be the Christian life, a kind of catechism, a training tool for Christian living. The book we used, called The Christian Way, characterized the Beatitudes, our text for today, as a guide for "self-examination".

So, for example, in order of the series of "blessings", I am invited to ask myself, "Am I poor in spirit, i.e. do I know myself as poor or do I harbor exaggerated notions of myself?" "Do I mourn when I do wrong or do I try to justify myself?" "Am I meek—do I have a settled trust in God?" "What do I hunger for—righteousness or *self*-righteousness? Do I thirst for God's love, for God's justice?" "Am I merciful, i.e. compassionate toward others?" "Am I pure of heart—do I practice personal integrity, honesty, consistency of walk and talk?" "Am I a peacemaker—do I promote harmony and reconciliation?" And finally, "if my Christian convictions are put to the test, do I stand up for right even when it costs me something?"

I am challenged by this way of reading the Beatitudes, and I commend this practice of regular self-examination and reflection on our personal walk with God. Also the regular reading and familiarity with the whole SM as one of the most important texts of Scripture.

Just a further word about the SM. It appears that early in the life of the Christian movement, there was a strong impulse to gather the actual words of Jesus, as remembered by his disciples and early hearers, into a concise collection that would convey both the wisdom and urgency of Jesus' life and calling. This would be especially for new converts, or inquirers. The SM is just such a

collection, the most extensive one in the NT, of Jesus' fundamental teachings and exhortations. So I want to highlight the profound significance of Matt. 5-7 for our life as a congregation in this season of Epiphany—walking with Jesus into the unknown, but open to new light, to the transforming work of God's Word and Spirit among us.

In preparing to share on the lectionary text today, I came on a short commentary that has somewhat refocused this passage for me. So..., while these verses can be read as an exhortation to Jesus' followers to examine themselves in terms of certain character traits and behaviors, this text may also have another function. It can be understood as a call to find and join those whom Jesus has pronounced "blessed". It's a call to personal transformation but also to action. It may not be too strong to say, **it's a call to "revolution"**.

Who, then, were these folks whom Jesus called "blessed"? The second beatitude singles out *those who mourn*; the commentator I cited suggests that any attentive reader of Matthew's Gospel will remember, from chap. 2, "Rachel's weeping for her children"—where Rachel is said to be grieving over the little ones slaughtered in Bethlehem by Herod's soldiers soon after the birth of Jesus. The Hebrew people of Jesus' time had much to grieve over—tragedy and oppression at the hands of Herod and Roman occupiers. In Matt. 4 we learn of the arrest of John B. and his imprisonment by Herod Antipas, an event that apparently alarmed Jesus. Somewhat later of course, John was beheaded, and Jesus grieved.

Who else are these "blessed ones"? The *poor in spirit* and *the meek* of the first and third beatitudes probably refer to a class known as *anawim* in the Scripture—the poor of Palestine who know they are poor, some of whom despair because of their misfortune and others who doggedly persist in eking out a miserable life. Some of these may well be persons, victims of injustice, who *hunger for justice* (righteousness), persons who, having received mercy, are themselves *merciful* toward others, and persons *pure of heart*, whose poverty is the result of their deep integrity and trust in God. Likewise we can imagine persons committed to *peacemaking*, to reconciliation in place of vengeance, becoming targets of those devoted to retributive justice or tribal superiority or Roman domination, and therefore being *persecuted*. Luke has a parallel list of

those who are blessed, much more concise and blunt: “Blessed”, he writes, “are you who are poor, hungry, who weep, who are hated, rejected, insulted and condemned as evil.”

Now we have named many of the kinds of persons that Jesus called blessed, those whom Jesus was calling his hearers to join in solidarity. If we assume that in this passage Jesus was not just calling his hearers to be “like” the *blessed ones*, but to be with them, to be them; how was that to be done? But of course, we should not assume that Jesus’ hearers were not themselves some of the *blessed ones*. Notice that after eight “blessed are those”, Jesus then said, in verse 11, “blessed are you...” And then he followed that up with “You are the salt of the earth...and you are the light of the world...”

Only a few paragraphs before the text of the beatitudes, Matthew’s Gospel tells us that Jesus had begun proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” and calling his first disciples. This is the revolutionary call implicit in the Beatitudes: Change your hearts, minds, and behavior, because heaven is invading earth. And some of you have already begun to live that revolutionary reality; you have embraced the way of heaven on earth, even if you didn’t know it. Now you know it—these experiences of despair, grief, being hated and reviled, these traits of trust, compassion, persistent honesty, pursuing justice and peace—heaven, or rather, God, is in them, and with you.

And the consequence, the reward, the blessing, of taking on this revolutionary life is the experience that goes beyond the despair, the grief, the abuse—it is the experience of heaven on earth—yours is the kingdom, the kingdom, of heaven—the Beloved Community—it is comfort, mercy, the bounty of the earth, the relationship with fellow children of God. And the reality of living out this kinship will be salt and light to the rest of the world, that is, healing and hope.

When I ponder the beatitudes and the call to be with, to be among, the poor, those who are blessed, I think of the Poor People’s Campaign in this country, in Elkhart. I’ve gone to some of the local gatherings, and seeing mostly middle-class white folks, I sometimes ask, “Well, where are the poor?”

Then I realize I'm making false distinctions. Those who gather are the “blessed ones” of the Beatitudes—poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungering for justice, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and no doubt, sometimes persecuted. If in a setting like that, we/I begin to evaluate and judge others' qualifications to be there, or judge those who aren't there, then those whom I imagine to be “poor” will probably never be comfortable there. As a person of privilege (white, male, straight and middle-class), I still have much to learn about the subtle habits and criteria that I unwittingly impose on others.

The revolutionary call of the beatitudes is to the transformed heart that perceives the created dignity of every other person, in fact of every other creature, and is willing to be transformed in mind and behavior as well. Jesus taught us to pray for the coming of God's kindom and will on earth. If that reality is really “at hand”, as Jesus proclaimed, then I need to be ready to live in it.

Keith Kingsley