

Beatitude Attitude

Sermon by Kelly Jenner, given at Lynn Valley United Church, Jan 30, 2011

Some of you may be wondering "how can we be doing a reflection on the scripture when there hasn't been a reading today?" The exclusion of the reading this morning was intentional.

You've heard this section of Matthew many times before... so many times, I believe, that you could almost say them along with whoever was reading it... Here... I'll start and you put up your hand if you've never heard the passage.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

(picture shown of a child living in a garbage dump in South America)

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

(picture shown of a woman wailing beside a bullet riddled wall)

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

(picture shown of a child with deformed hands)

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

(picture shown of a pair of young adults reading the bible)

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

(picture shown of a group of people feeding the "homeless")

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

(picture shown of a baby getting bathed by grandpa)

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

(picture shown of a soldier playing guitar for kids in middle east)

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

(picture shown of a bloodied hand, holding a cross)

-Picture changes to "wordle" of Beatitudes

I pitched Blair with an idea I had for this sermon because it has intrigued me since I first read this scripture here, at this pulpit (well when it was over there) in this church a little over 20 years ago. Being new to church- not just this church but any church at all, I had never heard the word beatitude and I thought it was pronounced beauty-tude. I had a few audible corrections from the pews that day... perhaps you remember?! It made an impression on me- not because I was a tad embarrassed, which I was- but because I wondered at how a passage of the bible could hold such importance for people that they would feel it was necessary to correct me while I was reading- I'm just a kid (I was then, anyway!). And how is it that I knew the blessings, but not the title by which they were known?

All this time later, and I have been through the bible a few times... not an expert by any means, but I kind of get how the story goes. Here's the reader's digest version review to catch up everyone, just in case you haven't been here in a while... Jesus has been baptized then gone off to the desert to fast and pray, where he is tempted by the devil. He comes home to find that his cousin, John the Baptist, has been imprisoned and he heads to Galilee to avoid the authorities. There is mention of all this to ensure some ancient prophesy is fulfilled. Then Jesus calls his first disciples and he begins preaching and healing and the crowds grow, as word of healing and miracles is spread; the crowds get so huge and the synagogues are too small to hold everyone Jesus moves out to the hills to teach.

Now that we are all on the same page, we hear him offering the preamble to his famous sermon on the mount. Blair would point out here that mountain top experiences in the bible are code for "pay very close attention!" This is the same sermon that brought us the lord's prayer, judge not lest you be judged, and turn the other cheek- and is seen as the pinnacle of Jesus' life in ministry- a real live person, laying hands on regular people to heal them, walking with them in their day to day drudgery, sharing words to live by.

The rest of Jesus' sermon that day is fuel for another day. For today, I am going to concentrate on the beatitudes and how it is that they have become embedded in our culture as "right belief" -for us as believers, for people beyond these doors, and even for the unchurched. This is what they call "cultural context" -when something is accepted as part of a shared history regardless of background.

In my research for this sermon, I read through essays, dissertations, other sermons and excerpts of doctoral theses regarding the beatitudes- one thing stood out for me... if you understand the beatitudes, you either haven't really heard them or haven't given them anywhere near enough thought. The words are simple, elegant, poetic- and yet, as with most lessons from the bible, layered with deep meaning and complexity.

Whether this is a story shared or historical account is debated to this day, but Matthew took great pains to give as much detail to this time in the life of Jesus as he could. The big question for me is why has Luke's version of this story glossed over so many of the details provided by Matthew, who takes over 100 verses to tell a story Luke tells in less than 40. Biblical scholars, however, tend to get hung up on the use of the word Blessing. It stirs controversy because it is unclear that it has retained its intended meaning in its translation from Aramaic to Latin to the current interpretations, where in some translations it is "blessed are the poor" and in others it is "happy are the poor." Either way it was a radical

statement. The funny thing is it continues to be radical statement to this day and these words give hope to many who are oppressed, persecuted, kept in poverty and misery, "Christian" or not.

So how does a speech given by someone 2000 years ago continue to hold profound meaning for believers and non- believers alike? Well, because they are words worth repeating.

Repeated in literature like Chaucer did with the Tale of Melibee in Canterbury Tales- a tale within the tales about vengeance and mercy.

(picture shown of " Canterbury Tales" book cover)

Repeated in architecture, as with the carved doors that grace the entrance to the Laon Cathedral in France which demonstrate the iconology used throughout Europe by the church to provide visual cues to the biblical texts for their illiterate parishioners- some 98% of the population... the medieval equivalent of powerpoint!

(picture shown of a close up of the doors to the cathedral)

Repeated in popular culture, such as in the movies Ben Hur and more recently, Jesus of Nazareth. As our technology changes, the way we tell the story changes, too.

(picture shown of scenes from the movies of the sermon on the mount)

Repeated in satire, the ultimate form of flattery- such as Monty Python's very irreverent look at 1st century life in The Life of Brian which depicts a small group of people at the fringes of the Jesus' lesson unable to hear him and bickering among themselves... and while this is not a glamorous or appropriate look at the text, it speaks to the universal nature of this bit of scripture.

(picture shown of the crowd and close up of the cast at the edge of the crowd)

Repeated in contemporary music like Blessed by Simon and Garfunkel and even Bobby McFerrin's Don't Worry, Be Happy. These are not hymns of praise written for church goers, but offer a glimpse of how some biblical texts have become integrated into our collective understanding.

(picture shown of album jackets from these two performers)

Repeated in the performing arts like the musical theatre production Godspell, which uses the beatitudes as a foreshadowing of Jesus' persecution and death... an interesting twist to the scripture that gives you much to think about.

(picture shown of beatitudes scene from the play)

Picture changes to question marks....

And if Jesus were here, in this church, right now, sharing words of wisdom for us to live by... what do you think he would say, especially given that he was considered "dangerous" in his day? And how do you think he would deliver his message? Would he offer us these well known and well loved words that give us such comfort - or would he be challenging us with some radical new way to be children of God? Would he offer a quiet heart-felt speech or blast out a flamboyant poem in alternating rhyming couplets in some coffee house...?

Perhaps he would shake us up with a tent meeting revival rant... or get down with a high-octane rock number with full horn section and interpretive dancers... and, please, for all that is decent don't let it be Rap! Of course given that rap is the predominant "alternative" it probably would be. Would you be okay with Opera...? And would he begin his sermon with blessed? or happy? Would it even be in English? Would we be ready to hear any of it?

That, I suppose, is the most compelling question of all.

Amen.