

“The Other Beatitudes”

Luke 6.17–26

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 11 February 2006

I grew up in the United Church of Christ in the 70s, a time when many of us kids in mainline churches didn’t learn much about the Bible. Unlike our fantastic workshop rotation model of Sunday School, which helps our children learn the stories of our faith using Howard Gardiner’s multiple-intelligence theory, some of us who were born in the 1960s learned in Sunday School about the five senses, racial equality, and the wonders of nature. That may not have been true for everyone, but it was for me. I once told my 11-year-old son Cameron (with only a slight sense of exaggeration) that he knows more about the Bible than I did until I went to seminary.

But I do remember memorizing two passages from the Bible: the 23rd Psalm and the Beatitudes. *Beatus* in Latin means *blessed* or *happy*, and so the section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount with all the “Blesseds” are called the Beatitudes. Of course, we memorized Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes, not Luke’s. Most American Christians probably don’t even know that Luke brought the Sermon on the Mount down to earth and calls it the Sermon on the Plain.

Luke’s rendition is a more raw, tough-minded set of blessings, which is one reason that it was not given to us kids to memorize – the same reason that most of us know Matthew’s version better. And Luke leaves in not just the blessings, but the curses as well, and *we can’t have that, can we?!*

Just from the memorization of those two passages of scripture, one can zero in on the dominant theology at Second Congregational UCC in Greenwich, Connecticut, in the 1970s: God was a gentle shepherd leading us, comforting us, protecting us. The poor *in spirit* were blessed, and that was good news indeed for my family, for the chairmen of the board of Exxon, General Electric, and Textron, all of whom were members of our congregation, not to mention one of our senior members, George Herbert Walker, after whom two presidents have been named. (I was just impressed because he was part owner of the New York Mets!) This was a congregation that defined privilege and wealth. I don’t envy the clergy at that congregation trying to preach on Luke’s version of the Beatitudes: imagine telling the captains of industry: “Blessed are you poor” but “woe to you who are rich!” Can you imagine?! That would be tough to hear if you were in their shoes.



I hate to tell you this. . . ***we are in their shoes.***

The Greek word we translate as poor *ptoichos* doesn’t mean struggling middle class. It doesn’t mean that you bought a more expensive car than you should have and you’re having trouble making the payments. It doesn’t mean that things are tight because your son or daughter is attending a private liberal-arts college. It doesn’t mean that you’re worried that your 401(k) won’t be what you hoped so you can retire when you’re 65. *Ptoichos* means dirt poor. . . indigent. . . hungry. . . without any property. I’m not aware of anyone in this congregation who is in that place. . . who is “blessed” in that way.

But, the rest of us: woe to us who are rich, for we have received our consolation!

Some scholars say that these Beatitudes are directed to the disciples, not to the those who have gathered to hear Jesus preach. (And you could make that argument, based on Luke’s account: “Then *he looked up at his disciples* and said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’”) Richard Horsley writes, “As such they do not speak of ‘the general human conditions of poverty and suffering’ applicable to the crowds or the

generic ‘anxiety about the basic necessities’ but of specific consequences of discipleship.” (Horsley 1991:194).

Phew! That was a close one. Maybe the text really isn’t about poverty in general. We don’t have to worry unless...we... are... disciples...or...followers of Christ.

The reality is that 2.1 billion people on this planet – 33% of everyone around the world (and 72% of us in the United States) – claim to be Christian, so if poverty is supposed to be a “specific consequence of discipleship,” then some of us are blowing it. (Just for the record, 21 percent of the world is Muslim, and only 2/10th of one percent are Jewish.) Maybe we’re meant to be sacrificing a bit more than we are already.



I have a hunch that most of us in this room would share our lunch if a hungry person sat down next to us. But, there are a lot of hungry people whom we simply don’t see. And sometimes there are hungry people whom we don’t want to see.

Last weekend I watched the film, *Hotel Rwanda*, which details one story within the tragedy of the genocide in that central African nation in the early 1990s. In one particularly memorable scene, Nick Nolte, playing a Canadian United Nations peace-keeping officer, does some hard truth-telling to Don Cheadle, who plays the wheeling-dealing hero who is desperately trying to get the outside world to pay attention to what is going on in Rwanda. “You should spit in my face,” Nolte says to Cheadle. “You’re dirt. We think you’re dirt, Paul ... The West, all the superpowers ... They think you’re dirt. They think you’re dung ... You’re not even a nigger. You’re African.”

Sometime, there are people who we wish would remain invisible. We wish we didn’t have to see refugees in Darfur. We would rather not deal with Mexicans coming across the border into the United States. Our military’s “Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell” policy is mirrored in most churches so that gay and lesbian folks stay deeply in the closet. And we’d certainly rather not be forced to acknowledge and deal with homeless people living in Fort Collins.

Most of us would share our lunch with a refugee, give a drink to a Mexican migrant, pass the peace with a lesbian, or give a few bucks to the Homelessness Prevention Initiative.

But, why do we tolerate a world that allows these conditions to exist in the first place? I’m not suggesting that we just throw money at problems – which often creates vicious cycles of corruption and dependence – though it’s a place to start. But, I am suggesting that we help create equitable, sustainable systems that enable people to help themselves. And when dire situations arise globally or locally, we should have the capacity to respond with compassion and tangible assistance.

What I hope you hear me saying is that our faith demands justice, not just charity. Discipleship is costly. Justice is costly. And if we have the courage to open our eyes, we will see there is much work to be done in the world around us.



Aren’t there times when we would rather that Jesus remain invisible...or at least silent? Jesus is so *non-threatening* when he is the paschal victim on the cross or when he is that babe in the manger. Jesus is so *benign* when all we have to do is say that he is our Lord and Savior in order to be saved. But “the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.” (Isa. 35.5)

The low-cost disciple isn’t following the Jesus of the Beatitudes. There is far more required of us if we claim to be disciples of the Christ of our faith, who demands that we risk everything for the sake of the kingdom of God.



Last Thursday I received an email from a reporter at the *Denver Post* doing a follow-up story on a sermon I preached last year about God and evolution, and inquiring why I wasn't going to preach about evolution again today, when some mainline churches are celebrating Evolution Sunday. I answered that the primary reason was because the evolution debate is basically old news in this congregation. You all may like it when I "preach to the choir," so to speak, and it's easier for me, but I hope I'm able to push you all (and myself) a little bit to keep those discipleship muscles toned. And I hope the words of Jesus push you at least a little to do something, to grow, to expand your horizons and your involvement.

My prayer for us is that we approach God's world and our faith with eyes, ears, and hearts open to God, to our inner selves, and to all of God's children.

This is one of my favorite prayers, one that our choir has sung in a setting by John Rutter. It comes from the Sarum Primer, published in Salisbury, England, in the late middle ages, and I've added to it a bit:

God, be in my head and in my thinking.
God, be in my eyes and in my seeing.
God, be in my ears and in my listening.
God, be in my mouth and in my speaking.
God, be in my hands and in my acting.
God, be in my heart and in my understanding.
God, be at my end and in every new beginning.
Amen.