

Preaching the Beatitudes in the Age of Trump

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A few weeks before the 2016 presidential election, Mark¹ wore a black t-shirt to choir practice with the words “basket of deplorables” printed in white letters across the front. Most of the people who were going to vote for Donald Trump in our left-leaning congregation were quiet about it, but this one came out of the closet wearing a t-shirt. He is not a mean-spirited person, certainly no more mean-spirited than I am. He volunteers in the church and in the community; he works with kids whom other people don’t have time for; he sings in the choir. He is one of us, if “us” means the group of Christians trying to be the church for the world at the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Brevard, North Carolina.

Charlie sleeps with a loaded handgun in his nightstand. He is a retiree living in a modest home on a quiet street that has seen no home invasions—ever. Yet he is vigilant. He comments to his pastor that if someone comes after him or his family, he does not intend to go down without a fight. And he reports that since he decided to keep the gun close, he sleeps much better. He volunteers in the congregation and with the local sheriff’s department. Often throughout the year, you will find him spending his Saturday mornings helping to control traffic so that participants in bike rides or road runs in our mountain town are safe.

Julie is on the Religious Affairs Committee for our county’s chapter of the NAACP. On her Facebook feed, you can keep up with the marches and meetings she is part of. She is convening a group in the congregation to explore how we can be more involved in ministry on behalf of immigrants and refugees. She herself takes refuge in snark from time to time, and in raging at the television news. On the other hand, she sits down to talk with the guy in our congregation who sends rightwing emails to about a dozen of us regularly. Most of the rest of us just press the delete key.

All of us make a confession of sin each Sunday and hear words of forgiveness. We share the peace of Christ with each other. Christ shares his body and blood with us. We and a couple hundred others make up a congregation with a vision statement that even the pastor struggles to quote exactly, but is something like “Following Jesus, we will love one another, serving all.” Following, loving, serving: that much we can remember.

Americans regularly hear that our culture is getting more and more divided into enclaves of people who think alike. Social media logarithms direct “more of the same” to us so that we see less and less information that would challenge what we believe, especially what we believe about “the other.” And yet almost all of us who belong to a Christian congregation find ourselves in the same pew week after week with people that no logarithm would pair with us. All of us at Good Shepherd would say there are some “crazy others” in the congregation we attend, and while we may be stunned by each other from time to time, so far we are still together.

Each week, just by worshipping together, we are resisting the temptation to believe that if we just voted Mark off the island, or Julie, we would offer a better witness to the Gospel. By loving each other—even on days when we need the scripted words

and actions of the liturgy to do so—we expose the biggest lie of our culture: that if only some of us were gone, our way of life would be secure again. The temptation of the present age is to believe that after just a little violence—the snarky joke, some deportations, the death penalty, or what the gun in the nightstand can do—we will be safe.

The beatitudes clarify that our safety lies elsewhere. The beatitudes are blessings with which Jesus begins the sermon on the mount. As his sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth is Jesus' inaugural address in Luke (cf. Luke 4:16-30), the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7) is the inaugural address of Jesus in Matthew. Jesus will issue many imperatives as he sits atop a mountain addressing his disciples with the crowd listening in, but he begins with blessings, not commands. (If I could say only one thing to preachers of the beatitudes, it would be, “Stop telling us to go out there and be meek, or pure in heart, or really good at mourning! Jesus is blessing people, not exhorting them.”) With the exception of “rejoice and be glad” in the final blessing, the beatitudes are entirely declarative statements.

We know the blessing form from the Hebrew Bible.² There, blessings may be directed toward God or toward human beings. The blessings directed toward humans may be offered either because of the person’s present circumstances or because of something that will come to them in the future. The beatitudes of the sermon on the mount are of this last type. The first half of each verse names a group of people and calls them blessed. The second half of each verse adds a specific word about the future of these currently blessed ones. The formula is: “blessed are _____, for they will _____.”

Jesus speaks blessing after blessing: nine in all, and after each one, he announces a promise, a little window on the age to come. Each blessing is offered here and now, even as it calls to mind a reality that is not yet. The first and eighth promise are in the present tense, but even these (“theirs is the kingdom of heaven”) point to a not-yet-fully-arrived place/time. In each case, the objects of blessing are said to be blessed in the present because something surprising and heartening—indeed, their heart’s desire—will be theirs in the future.

How does Jesus know this? He cites no source for his authoritative words about the future. The beatitudes are similar in this way to his antitheses elsewhere in the sermon, “You have heard it said..., but I say to you...,” which are also offered without citation. Together with these antitheses, the beatitudes are likely part of the reason that when he finishes the sermon, “the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (7:28-29). It will take the rest of Jesus’ ministry to clarify who Jesus is and how he can make promises about a future no one else can see yet.

Part of what makes the beatitudes so arresting is the challenge of seeing this future as *belonging to those to whom it is promised*. Robert Smith points out that the surprise of the beatitudes is not in the second half of each, but in the first. “All the reasonably good and religious people of that day looked for the kingdom of God, and they knew by heart the promise of psalms and prophets about inheriting the land, seeing God, and being children of God.”³ The surprise is that these promises were for the fundamentally insecure by standards of the day, that is, people who lacked social standing, political power, and spiritual virtuosity.⁴ Reading through the descriptors of the blessed ones helps to make this point. The blessed are:

- Poor in spirit
- Mourning
- Meek
- Hungering and thirsting for righteousness
- Merciful
- Pure in heart
- Peacemakers
- Persecuted
- Slandered

Is this not a list of nice folks who can expect to finish last? We read down the list and wonder whether the blessing of God is not a consolation prize awarded to those who are too kind for politics, too passive for business, and too sensitive for ministry. “Losers, all of them,” might be the tweet.

But about such people, Jesus says that they are blessed because they will:

- Have the kingdom of heaven
- Be comforted
- Inherit the land (earth)
- Be satisfied
- Obtain mercy
- See God
- Be daughters and sons of God
- Have the kingdom of heaven
- Have a great reward

Jesus begins the formation of his disciples this way. He announces *this* future for *these* blessed ones. Why? To answer that question, we might ask, “When does it help to know the end of a story at its beginning?” Answer: when the story is going to get very scary in the middle. Jesus puts this future before the disciples—and Matthew puts it before his readers—so that they (we) have these promises when comfort, land, righteousness, mercy, God’s reign, and the capacity to see, know, and be known by God are threatened. And they will be. If, in the scariest parts of the story, we are to reject trying to get safe by violence, hatred of enemies, laying up treasures on earth, public displays of generosity, and worry, we must know something about the nature of our God and our destination.⁵ Those who take to heart the imperatives of the sermon on the mount will find themselves in situations where they need to know over and over again that they are, finally, held in the love and justice of God.

When we know that this is the end of the story, our imagination and our lives change. Jesus’ promises have the effect of pulling the future they describe into the present “ahead of time.” The best explanation I know for how a promise changes things before it is fulfilled comes from a thirty year-old article by homiletics professor Richard Lischer, “Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise.”⁶ Lischer begins by saying that a promise cannot be detached from the one speaking it, and then he explains with a story:

If I am out of work and on relief, and the owner of the local grocery store promises me a job in two weeks, whether or not I now adopt a stance of hope in the world depends on the character of the one who promises. Does he have a history of faithful actions from which I can abstract the quality of faithfulness and ascribe it to him? Are there testimonies to his faithful-

ness? If so, my life has already changed. It changes with the issuance of the promise (73).

Does Lischer's would-be grocery worker have a job yet? Technically, no. He *will* have a job in two weeks; even so, this afternoon he twirls his wife around the kitchen when he arrives home. Tonight he sleeps without the usual interval in the wee hours spent staring at the ceiling, awake. Next week, he makes sure he has something in which to pack his lunch to work each day. The day before the job starts, he lays out his work clothes. *His life has already changed.* All of these observable actions flow from a promise made by a trustworthy grocery store owner.

The beatitudes are promises. Jesus speaks them with authority. Of course, in the narrative of the Gospel, most of the revelation of his character that will make his promises trustworthy and therefore life-changing for those to whom they are addressed has not happened yet. It will. Throughout his life and in his death, Jesus reveals how he can bless and promise as he does at the beginning of his ministry.

Preaching the beatitudes during Lent naturally lends itself to observations about how Jesus himself inhabits the ways of life that he pronounces blessings upon.

- “Blessed are those who mourn,” Jesus says (5:4). When he receives the news of John’s death, “he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself” (14:13), and while only Luke notes that Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, in Matthew also he laments, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (23:37).
- “Blessed are the meek (Greek: *praīs*),” Jesus says (5:5). He uses the same word to describe himself: “I am gentle (*praīs*) and lowly of heart” (11:29), and as he rides into Jerusalem, Matthew comments that the circumstances of his journey “took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble (*praīs*), and mounted on a donkey...’” (21:4-5).
- “Blessed are the merciful,” Jesus says (5:7). Four healing stories in Matthew begin with people addressing Jesus, “Son of David, have mercy... (cf. 9:27, 15:22, 17:15, and 20:30).” In every case, Jesus heals those who need it.
- “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus says (5:9), and even though in this Gospel, he also says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (10:34), when a sword actually appears in the story, he rebukes the one who wields it. “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?” (27:52-54).
- “Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” Jesus says (5:10) and “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely” (5:11). In his trial and passion, he endures beatings, false witnesses, ridicule, and state-sanctioned death even though he is innocent.

Jesus will himself need to know the end of the story through the middle. Even then, his only word from the cross in Matthew is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (27:46).

It turns out Jesus is wrong about that. God has not forsaken him, and as the Fa-

ther raises the Son from the dead, the promises first spoken in the beatitudes come true: You will be comforted. You will inherit the earth. You will receive mercy. You will be called a son of God. Yours is the kingdom of heaven. Your reward is great in heaven.

Even in Lent, we preach on the Easter side of resurrection. As David Bartlett observes, “It is Jesus who pronounced those blessings on the mountain; it is the Risen Lord who authoritatively continues to bless by his instruction and his presence.”⁷ Within the gospels and the rest of the New Testament, as well as the life and liturgy of the congregation, there are testimonies to the Risen Lord’s faithfulness. His risen life, shared with the world in the person of the Spirit, is the means by which those promises on the mountain have the power to change the story in which we live.

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I have a hunch that the goal of political rhetoric in the current age is to keep its hearers fearful. On the surface, it looks like the goal of political rhetoric in the current age is to keep everyone angry, but underneath anger is almost always fear. We are afraid of many things: some of us fear that there is no longer a meaningful distinction between truth and falsehood; some fear that our “American way of life” is about to be lost. We fear the other, the bully, the loser, the rich, the poor. We are afraid of getting old, getting cancer, being irrelevant, being in the minority. We are afraid of dying. All this fear makes us hunger and thirst for security.

- We take our shoes off at the airport and step into body scanners, comforted by “screening.”
- We approve laws said to ensure that non-citizens will not vote in local elections, even though boards of elections data refutes the claim that non-citizens are even *trying* to vote in our elections.
- Calls for metal detectors in our schools vie with calls for guns in our schools—all to keep our children safe.
- The need for security justifies violence, even the “pre-emptive strike,” as prudent. Locally and nationally, in small ways and in ways that cost billions of dollars and thousands of lives, we aim to get safe.

When fear triggers a fight response, we risk becoming exactly what we oppose. At the invitation of a peace-loving friend who is active in politics and dismayed at the current national political scene, I attended a rock-painting class at a local art space. For two hours, a group of eight or nine women sat around a drop cloth covered table painting mandalas and other “dot art” on small rocks. It was close work, but accessible to a variety of talent levels, and the end products were beautiful. As the evening wound down, my friend said, “This has been great! For two hours, I didn’t feel like shooting anybody.” Her comment illustrates the risk of being hooked up to the daily IV drip of rage from anyone, national figures included. Eager to oppose the policies represented by such violent rhetoric, we nonetheless get amped up on it. We may even become what we hate.

The Beatitudes take us in a different direction. The blessings with which Jesus begins the sermon on the mount proclaim *present and eternal security* to a group of people who have neither political power nor spiritual virtuosity. From that place of ultimate safety, followers of Jesus are free to risk living in the ways Jesus describes in the rest of the sermon. We may risk sleeping without a firearm nearby, loving those

who call us deplorable, praying for our persecutors, not saying “You fool!” at the television (cf. Matthew 5:22), and greeting with joy the powerful resistance that our actions will call forth from the rulers of this age. As we risk such a way of life, followers of Jesus embody something like an “alternative universe” right in the middle of one that is characterized by the reign of the mean-spirited, the proliferation of fake news, and the dehumanization and exploitation of the disenfranchised. Ahead of time, followers of Jesus inhabit what in Matthew Jesus calls the kingdom of heaven. Will it make a difference? Jesus promises that lives lived this way change their surroundings as a city set on a hill changes the landscape of which it is a part. Like a lamp set on a lampstand, the community blessed as the beatitudes describe will give light to all the house.

Notes

1 I have changed the names of my parishioners but not the details of their stories.

2 Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Herder & Herder), 41, reviews these different forms and offers examples. Amy Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, second edition* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 18, documents the way that the beatitudes in Matthew recall various texts from the Psalms, Isaiah, and Proverbs.

3 Robert H. Smith, *Matthew* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 80.

4 Robert H. Smith, “Blessed Are the Poor in (Holy) Spirit? (Matthew 5:3),” *Word & World* 18/4 (1998): 389-396) argues that “poor in spirit” refers to those who lack the capacity for dramatic deeds of power (cf. Matthew 7:21-23). Allison, *Sermon on the Mount*, hears “poor in spirit” as “those who acknowledge their spiritual need” (45).

5 I allude here to Richard Lischer, “The Sermon on the Mount as Radical Pastoral Care,” *Interpretation* 41/2 (1987): 157-169. He writes, “Our only hope of living as the community of the Sermon is to acknowledge that we do not retaliate, hate, curse, lust, divorce, swear, brag, preen, worry, or backbite because it is not in the nature of our God or our destination that we should be such people. When we as individuals fail in these instances, we do not snatch up cheap forgiveness, but we do remember that the *ekklesia* is larger than the sum of our individual failures and that it is pointed in a direction that will carry us away from them” (163).

6 “Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise,” *Word & World* 8/1 (1988): 66-79.

7 David Bartlett, “The Beatitudes,” *Journal for Preachers* 40/2 (Lent 2017): 19.