

“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...” Jesus has just begun his ministry when this story begins. Things are just getting started. He has called four of his twelve disciples – Peter, Andrew, James, and John – who have been traveling with him as Jesus preached and healed throughout Galilee. As it is described in Matthew’s gospel, this sermon that Jesus gives, known as the sermon on the mount, is spoken to his disciples alone. This morning we heard just the very beginning of this sermon, the blessings known as “The Beatitudes.”

This text is often read as a guide for being a good Christian. Some people might read these blessings and see them as conditions of God’s blessing. They might read “blessed are the pure in heart” and wonder “Is my heart pure enough for God to bless me?” Or “blessed are the peacemakers” and they think “I should be doing more for peace in order to be blessed by God. When read this way this list of blessings seems completely unrealistic and unattainable. It doesn’t match up with the reality that we see when we look at the world.

As the Rev. Dr. Delmer Chilton writes, “Our mistake is to think that the Sermon on the Mount is about us, about our personal behavior, that it is kind of like a graduation speech in which a wise and witty famous person explains to us the nine secrets of lifestyle success; or “How to Be a Happy Christian.” The Sermon on the Mount is not Jesus’ Little Instruction Book.” He continues, “It is, rather, a proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus and these four disciples had spent at least a little bit of time together at this point. Matthew writes that Jesus had traveled throughout Galilee preaching and healing all sorts of diseases and afflictions. I wonder if this time on the mountain was an effort on Jesus’ part to help the disciples understand what they were witnessing. Rather than a guide to being a happy Christian, these Beatitudes were a description of the kingdom of God. Jesus isn’t laying out criteria for the disciples on who to bless and who to turn away, but rather he is simply proclaiming a blessing upon all kinds of people – the people whom the world forgets or rejects,

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<sup>1</sup> Delmer L. Chilton, “Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A,” *Lectionary Lab*, January 22, 2017, <https://lectionarylab.com/>.

the people who would be least expected to be favored by God. In doing this, Jesus is telling the disciples (and us) that God frequently shows up in the last place they might expect – with those who are suffering, with those whose faith is shaky, with those who are grieving, with the gentle and the timid. These are not the places the people of the ancient world expected God to be and I’m not sure most people today expect it either.

What might these blessings be if we re-wrote them today? The Rev. Dr. Rachel Keefe, pastor of Living Table UCC in Minneapolis wrote a few of her own, including:

Blessed are the forgotten and forsaken, the ones we walk by and overlook, for heaven will be their home.

Blessed are those mothers who rage against the deaths of their black and brown skinned children whose blood flows in our streets, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the faithful Muslims and Jews who live under threat of hateful bombs, for they will inherit the Earth.

Blessed are those transgender, queer, and gender-nonconforming people who hunger and thirst for recognition and welcome, for they will be filled.<sup>2</sup>

Given the recent executive order on immigration I would add “Blessed are the refugees for they will find a home in the arms of God.” and “Blessed are families who are torn apart by violence or legislation, for they will be reunited.”

This is what the kingdom of God looks like. It is the lifting up and blessing those whom society has deemed “less-than” or proclaimed to be outsiders. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds the church that God’s foolishness is wiser than the wisdom of the world. And that God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. This is when we might respond with “what the what?” The message of the cross looks like foolishness. It didn’t make sense that someone like Jesus who was supposed to be the messiah and

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Keefe, “RCL: Humility, Foolishness, and Blessing,” *RevGalBlogPals*, January 24, 2017, <https://revgalblogpals.org/2017/01/24/rcl-humility-foolishness-and-blessing/>.

the son of God, would be brutally executed. In response to the military power of the Roman Empire that occupied ancient Israel, Jesus didn't raise an army. He didn't prepare for battle in order to free the Jewish people for Roman oppression. Instead he preached love and acceptance, repentance and forgiveness. This kind of philosophy is still today often viewed as foolishness, as naïve and unrealistic.

Just look around at what the society seems to value – wealth, power, status, strength, military force, winners and losers, safety at all costs. But the message of Jesus is different. The message of Jesus is that God couldn't care less about that stuff. Instead of wealth – charity. Instead of power, collaboration. Instead of status – humility. Instead of strength – faith. Instead of military force – compassion. Instead of winners and losers – community. Instead of safety at all costs – loving our neighbor as ourselves and welcoming the stranger.

Rev. Margaret Aymer writes, "Paul argues that God used the Roman equivalent of the lynching tree and character assassination. God used the cross on which a person was displayed to the world naked and helpless, emasculated and left to die for hours, mocked, beaten, and crying out for mercy under the unforgiving desert sun. God used this moment of utter dehumanization and death in the name of peace and security to shame all of the powers, all of the wisdom, all of the philosophers, and of the mighty of the first century."<sup>3</sup>

Mark Twain quipped once that "History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme." The villainization of Muslims, the violence against bodies with black and brown skin, the victimization of the poor to line the pockets of the wealthy, these things do not repeat the story of the cross, but they do rhyme.

Rev. Aymer writes that these injustices "rhyme with Jesus' death, reminding us that he was not the last unarmed innocent to be condemned to certain death by powers that justified

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Aymer, "ON Scripture: Foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18-24)," *Key Voices*, September 8, 2014, [http://day1.org/6168-on\\_scripture\\_foolishness\\_1\\_corinthians\\_11824\\_by\\_margaret\\_aymer](http://day1.org/6168-on_scripture_foolishness_1_corinthians_11824_by_margaret_aymer).

his killing in the name of their own peace and security. And in that rhyme is a call to raise our voices and not be silenced.”<sup>4</sup>

My own theology leads me to believe that God did not put Jesus on the earth for the purpose of dying on the cross. I know that many of you do hold that belief. I also don't believe that God causes people to suffer as part of a bigger plan. But I do believe that God can use that suffering to do great things. In response to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, his followers continued his ministry of radical love and unconditional grace. We have a choice about how we respond to violence and injustice. I was literally moved to tears yesterday watching thousands of people gather in peaceful resistance to the executive order banning people from seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States, even if they already had visas and green cards. Families across the United States are now separated from loved ones, from their studies, from their jobs, because of fear. Spouses are being forced to decide whether to live apart or to leave the US and seek a home somewhere else. But almost immediately, people began gathering at major airports across the country demanding that we not let fear of the stranger overtake God's call for us to love one another. Lawyers showed up at LAX to work for free on behalf of those who were detained. Waving signs and chanting "let them in" may seem like foolishness to some. But it proclaims the unconditional love and grace that is the foundation of God's kingdom.

How might God be able to use each and every one of us to bring about God's kingdom here on earth in the midst of racism, and xenophobia? In the words of the prophet Micah, how might we walk humbly with God while loving kindness and seeking justice? Only you can answer that question for yourself. Whatever way God is calling you, may we be naïve and foolish enough to believe that love can conquer hate, and that compassion is stronger than fear. And may all God's children be treated as our beloved siblings. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Aymer, "ON Scripture: Foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18-24)," *Key Voices*, September 8, 2014, [http://day1.org/6168-on\\_scripture\\_foolishness\\_1\\_corinthians\\_11824\\_by\\_margaret\\_aymer](http://day1.org/6168-on_scripture_foolishness_1_corinthians_11824_by_margaret_aymer).