

*Blessed are the Meek
and Those Who Hunger and
Thirst for Righteousness*

Third in Lenten Sermon Series on the Beatitudes

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

March 24, 2019

Psalm 37:1-9, 39-40

¹Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, ²for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. ³Trust in the LORD, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security. ⁴Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. ⁵Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act. ⁶He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday. ⁷Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. ⁸Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil.

⁹For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land. ³⁹The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; he is their refuge in the time of trouble. ⁴⁰The LORD helps them and rescues them; he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them, because they take refuge in him.

Luke 5:27-39

²⁷After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." ²⁸And he got up, left everything, and followed him. ²⁹Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. ³⁰The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" ³¹Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³²I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." ³³Then they said to him, "John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink." ³⁴Jesus said to them, "You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? ³⁵The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days." ³⁶He also told them a parable: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. ³⁷And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. ³⁸But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. ³⁹And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'"

In the darkest days of South Africa's apartheid, Anglican bishop Desmond Tutu used to lead groups of followers up a scrubby hill called Table Mountain high above Cape Town. It was an otherwise unremarkable place, except that from there they could look out on the ocean and see Robben Island - the prison that held Nelson Mandela and many other leaders of the resistance movement against the government's system of racial segregation and discrimination.

With armed police scrutinizing everything Desmond Tutu did and said, and Robben Island with the oppression it stood for visible in the distance, Tutu would remind those who hiked up that hill with him how the ways of God run counter to the ways of the world. Repeatedly, he would tell them that the relentless drive of Christian love would one day prevail over the repellent might of human hatred. His biographer said that Tutu's sermons on that high hill were, at one and the same moment, an act of worship, an act of renewal, and an act of defiance. They were a gesture of faith, ultimately vindicated by the power of persistence which brought the walls of apartheid down.¹

The relentless drive of Christian love will prevail, Desmond Tutu preached over and over again. For these weeks of Lent, we are following another preacher up a mountain, and he is reminding us of the need to confront the powers of the world through acts of worship, renewal and defiance. We have ascended that scrubby hill in Galilee where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, and are considering its opening verses, the Beatitudes one by one. This is our Lenten gesture of faith as we follow Jesus toward the cross, and try to be transformed by the powerful persistence of Jesus' words; Words which are meant to nurture our relentless drive of Christian love.

Jesus tells us the most unlikely people we would ever consider blessed by the world's standards alone – the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful and the pure in heart are the very people God blesses.

¹ Erik Kolbell, What Jesus Meant, p. 59.

Their reward is coming, Jesus says, and they will be honored citizens at the very heart of the Kingdom of God.

Today we are confronted with perhaps the most counter-intuitive blessings of them all. *Blessed are the meek - for they will inherit the earth; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness - for they will be filled.* To be meek is generally not a quality to which we aspire. A dictionary will give you its meaning AS: *quiet, gentle, easily imposed on, and submissive.* The example of the word used in a sentence is: “I used to call her Miss Mouse because she was so meek and mild.”

Generally, we do not affirm the quality of meekness, but in the gospel Jesus not only says the meek will inherit the earth, he also describes himself – as personifying this fragile quality. The same Greek word is used when Jesus invites us to come to him when we are weary and carrying heavy burdens where he says, “For I am gentle – and lowly of heart.” In a word, Jesus is saying, I am meek.

Likewise, we do not think those who hunger and thirst - for anything - as being particularly blessed. So what does Jesus mean by blessing those who hunger and thirst for righteousness? Righteousness is not a word we hear very often in regular conversation. As one scholar, Erik Kolbell, notes, “No.... righteousness is what, when I was a child, I would have called one of those *Sunday* words, by which I meant words we heard spoken at church with great gravity and reverence, but pretty much nowhere else.” And then he adds: “If I had to guess, I’d say we still don’t give the word righteousness much of a workout because its mere utterance conjures up strong images of a kind of monk-like holiness that seems so different from and indifferent to the more rough-hewn way most of us live our lives..... There is an otherworldly quality to righteous people in their sandaled feet barely scraping solid ground... We think they don’t worry about the same stuff I do, that they are better than others, but the truth is we are wrong to think this way. Righteousness is not about moral perfection; it is about relationship, about being right with God.”²

² John Carroll, *Luke*, New Testament Library, p. 132 ff.

The best way to be right with God is to know our need for God. The *meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness* know that we live by God's grace, and sometimes we have to wait with eager longing for God's ways to be revealed. If we pay attention to the mighty acts of Jesus and the stories Jesus tells, we come closer to understanding how these counter-intuitive blessings help nurture us for the relentless drive of Christian love.

The calling of Levi – the tax collector – to follow in the footsteps of Jesus would not have made sense to anyone. The tax collectors in Galilee – were Jewish residents willing to do the work of the Romans Empire – to support the military occupation on the backs of their fellow Galilean Jews. Everyone hated the tax collectors. Calling a few fisherman to follow along and learn how to instill hope in a broken and bitter people living under military occupation was one thing. But a tax collector is as much a traitor – they work for the oppressive regime!

In our story, it says Levi gave a great banquet – well of course he could; he'd gotten rich working for the Roman government. No wonder the religious authorities, the Pharisees, accuse Jesus saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus' embrace of sinners is a new thing that affirms – God's reign does not mix well with conventional ways of ordering the community's life. Jesus calls sinners, not righteous people because righteous people apparently do not require his services. Jesus mission is to sinners, and through them eventually everyone will encounter their need for God's grace and mercy.

So when the Pharisees question why Jesus eats and drinks with sinners, Jesus responds with two little mini parables. Each imagines a hypothetical situation that common sense would recognize as unthinkable. Nobody would be foolish enough to tear a patch from a new garment so as to mend an old one, for that would result in the ruin of both. Nobody would be foolish enough to store new wine in an old wineskin; to do so would result in the ruin of the wineskin and the loss of the wine. Both new and old come to ruin if you mix

them. Stubbornly clinging to the old ways of dividing the world into who is in and who is out, we fail to see the full-blown vision of the Kingdom of God. In the person of Jesus Christ, God is doing a new thing. God is inviting all of humankind into God's realm of grace and mercy. God is trying to transform us for the relentless drive of Christian love to counter the ways of the cruel world.

Popular novelist, Sue Monk Kidd, best known perhaps for *The Secret Life of Bees*, has also written a lot about her spiritual life. In one essay she tells of an experience in which she recognized the kind of spiritual healing and blessing God intends for all of us. She was at a retreat in which the leader gathered the group into a circle and handed out three balls of brightly colored yarn. The leader asked the participants to hold on tight to the end of a strand of yarn and then to toss the balls back and forth to one another across the circle. This went on for a long time, the yarn weaving a beautiful multi-colored web that stretched from person to person across the center of the circle. Then the leader said, "Each of you take a turn and wiggle your thread." What they discovered was that even the tiniest pull of one small thread vibrated the entire web.

Sue Monk Kidd reflected upon this later writing: "And it dawned on me – this immeasurable truth we were portraying. We are each a thread woven into the vast web of the universe, linked and connected so that our lives are irrevocably bound up with God and with one another. I looked at those faces around the circle in a new way. And suddenly I wanted to gather them to me and do what I could to heal them and bless them and affirm to them how beautiful they were."³

Spiritual healing and blessing is precisely what Jesus wanted for Levi, the despised tax collector. It is what Jesus actually wanted for the Pharisees also. Spiritual healing and blessing is what Jesus wants for the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

³ Sue Monk Kidd, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, p. 483.

Jesus wants us to be like that web made of yarn, linked and connected so that our lives are irrevocably bound up with God and with one another. Because when the meek inherit the earth, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are filled, all of us – even us – will be blessed with God’s favor.