

The Upside-Down Kingdom: Learning to See as God Sees

1Cor.1:25-29 Matthew 5:1-12

Our sermon series for the fall is going to be a reflection on the beatitudes, Jesus' pronouncement of blessings from Matthew 5:1-12. This will take us through November 16. Then, Nov.23 is Christ the King Sunday (that feels important to observe this year!) and Nov.30 is the first Sunday of Advent.

The beatitudes are the very beginning of what we call the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.5-7), where Jesus reframes the Old Testament law, and covers all kinds of important topics like reconciliation & peacemaking, responses to people of ill-intent, loving enemies, money, prayer, and, of course, what it means to put our trust in Jesus Christ. And it all begins with these 8 beatitudes. This morning I'm going to give an overview of them, and then we'll look at them one at a time for the next several Sundays.

The invitation in this overture to the Sermon on the Mount (which is really an overture to the entire gospel) is to see as God sees. To see the world as God sees it, to see people as God sees them. As I like to put it, we are invited to put on our Christ-colored glasses, to see as he sees, before we do anything.

So, when we talk about the beatitudes we are not talking about something we're supposed to **do** but something we're supposed to **see and believe**. They tell us something about who *God* is, and what's important to God, and how *God*

sees everything and everyone. At its heart, Christian spirituality is about seeing clearly; seeing rightly. Jesus talked a lot about clarity of vision in his teaching, and we'll talk about that as we go along.

Reflecting on the beatitudes together seems especially important right now, because of a kind of Christianity, a dangerous kind of Christianity expressed in what is called Christian nationalism, is being put forth by many in leadership as right, and normal. And it needs to be said, clearly, that it's wrong. Terribly wrong. And, it's abnormal.

Christian nationalism is an ideology that seeks to fuse Christian and national identity, advocating for the government to promote or enforce Christian beliefs. It's a political and cultural framework that uses Christian language and symbols to advance its own goals. Christian nationalism promotes dangerous thinking and philosophy, such as white supremacy, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and the dominance of one national identity above all others. These create an exclusionary and radicalized worldview, and it's all promoted using the name of Jesus, and selective parts of the Bible as the foundation of that worldview.

This ideology distorts the Christian faith by prioritizing political power and control over the actual teachings of Jesus. And in fact, some leaders distort the

very teachings of Jesus or hold views that are the exact opposite of what Jesus taught.

Christian nationalism isn't new. It's been around a long time. Christian nationalism was a central part of the ideology of the Klu Klux Klan (remember images of burning crosses). And, Christian nationalism was a notable part of the Nazi movement in Germany, particularly through a group called "The German Christians" and through Hitler's youth movement. These groups aligned Protestant Christianity with an authoritarian national identity that saw all non-white and gay and disabled people as inferior.

I don't mean to give a lecture on Christian nationalism! What I want to do is put this study of the beatitudes into our current social context. My goal is to help us remember what true Christianity is, what Jesus really taught, and to remember that our worldview as followers of the Way of Jesus—our seeing as God sees, with clarity of vision—is quite different from what is becoming popularized as normal.

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This is the word of the Lord!

With the pronouncement of blessings on the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, the humble, and so forth, Jesus is describing what has been called the upside-down Kingdom. Where everything the people understood from their culture at that time as to who was favored by God and who wasn't, and what it meant to live for God, is completely turned on its head, and turned around. Jesus often used paradoxical phrases to describe this kingdom: the last shall be first, the least shall be the greatest, and so forth, which describe an alternative vision of the world.

Jesus is inviting us to see the world, and live our lives, by a completely different vision—of the world, of God, and of others, based on the reality of the Kingdom of heaven that Jesus came to show and teach about. And there is much about this Kingdom that is upside down and backward, as we heard in the reading from 1Cor., where God's foolishness is wiser than conventional wisdom, and weakness is strength. There's paradox for you!

With that in mind, in the beatitudes, Jesus is inviting us to see the world through God's eyes, so to speak. Right at the outset of Jesus' ministry, with some of his very first words, he wants to make it abundantly clear that God sees things quite differently than the world typically sees them. That God sees *people* quite differently than the world typically sees them, and we are invited to join Jesus in seeing as God sees.

So, again, the beatitudes aren't something we're supposed to **do**, as much as something that we're supposed to **see**. Christian writer and professor Dallas Willard puts it this way: *"The beatitudes are not teachings on how to be blessed. They are not instructions to do anything. No one is actually being told that they are better off for being poor, for grieving, for being persecuted, and so on... The beatitudes cannot be good news if they are understood as a set of how-to's for achieving blessedness. They would only amount, then, to a new legalism, a new Phariseism."*

So, there is nothing to do here except to adjust our vision. And Jesus will pepper all of his teaching with reminders to keep our vision clear. We might say he gives us corrective eye exams from time to time! This is Jesus, our faithful spiritual optometrist. This isn't a literal seeing, of course; it's about attitude, understanding, perception, & where our heart is. It's about seeing with the eyes

of the heart, along with God. Helen Keller was sightless, but not heartless! She spoke and wrote a lot about the importance of spiritual insight.

With the beatitudes, Jesus is making a series of statements based on Kingdom realities; this is the world as God sees it. And it's the opposite of how people often see it—largely because of cultural conditioning.

Jesus is describing the upside-down, backwards Kingdom. Where everything is turned on its head, or turned around. Or, we could reframe this and look at it another way: it's the world that's upside down, and Jesus wants to turn it right side up! Like it says on the bulletin cover. Either way, Jesus is turning things around.

For example, we might say that the world (conventional culture) sees, and says, "Blessed and happy are those who have it all together and don't need help because they are self-made people." Jesus sees (differently) and says, "Blessed by God are those who know they *don't* have it all together, and aren't afraid to admit that they need help, and know they can't make it on their own."

The world sees and says, "Blessed and happy are the go-getters and the persuaders who know how to get their way." Jesus sees and says, "Blessed by God are those who put *others* first, and are hungry for God to get *his* way."

The world sees and says, “How happy are those who have made it to the top and who have achieved the pinnacle of success.” Jesus sees and says, “Blessed by God are those who live on a path of downward mobility.” And so on.

And the rest of Jesus’ teaching and ministry is going to reflect the upside-down, backwards nature of this Kingdom.

So, in a way, the beatitudes are really an introduction to Jesus’ entire ministry and teaching. What Jesus is saying is, “Before I teach how I want you to live and *act*, let me first tell you what *I see*, and what I want *you to see* and affirm as true; then the rest of my teaching will make sense to you. And, then, over time you will eventually live into what you see.”

These beatitudes are an invitation to a new way of seeing. To affirm as blessed what & who God affirms as blessed. Jesus wants us to get to a place where we can hear these words and say “yes.” Yes, the poor in spirit are blessed—I see it. Yes, the humble are blessed—I see it. Yes, those who hunger and thirst for justice and rightness are blessed—I see it.

Now, when the disciples first heard these words, these pronouncement of blessings (and the teaching that follows), this was so shocking to their right side up, ‘the-first-shall-be-*first*’ worldview, that their reflexive gut reaction would have

been to say “No!” (inwardly, if not outwardly). That isn’t how the world works. That isn’t how God works.”

The poor, the meek, those who are mourning are **not** blessed—by definition and by cultural norm. Having it all together and being prosperous and so forth was a sign of God’s *true* blessing in their worldview at that time. So, no, Jesus! What are you talking about?!?

And a lot of Jesus’ subsequent teaching comes as a shock as well: Turn the other cheek and not retaliate? No! *Love* your enemies? You can’t be serious!?! Consider the lilies of the field? That’s unproductive and a waste of time; get to work!

To get an idea of how radical and upside down and odd this would’ve sounded to the ears of Jesus’ followers at *that* time, picture in your mind just about any conflict between people groups from just about any place in the world today, and the prevailing world views and attitudes they hold, and the actions they take against each other. Can you picture it? Can you see these people hurling insults at each other, planning attacks, planting roadside bombs, or worse? Can you picture it? Can you hear them defending how right they are, and how wrong the other is? Defending their use of force, even invoking God’s name

to defend their beliefs and actions? Now, picture Jesus stepping into *that* and saying “Blessed are the meek;” “Love your enemies,” and so forth.

How do you think they would respond, today, to these beatitudes and the rest of this teaching in the Sermon on the Mount? If you think about it, these are the same kinds of people Jesus was speaking to back then; many of these conflicts are very deep, and very old. How would they react *today* if they heard these words from Jesus? Would they respond by saying, “Oh yes, of course, let’s do that instead”? Of course not (except for those who really do want peace). I think some would laugh at him; some would run him out of town; and some would want to kill him. They would say “no!” Get out of our way. You’re idealistic and impractical. That’s weakness...

So, it takes a while to get to “yes” with regard to Jesus’ teachings.

Remember when Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem, and Jesus sends out a small group ahead, a short-term reconnaissance trip among the Samaritans, because they were about to pass through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus sends these few of his people ahead of the larger group into Samaria to make their air b&b reservations and announce Jesus’ arrival. And the Samaritans told them they were not welcome—because Samaritans and Jews hated each other, and had hated each other for centuries. So, when the disciples

return from their reconnaissance trip to tell Jesus that the Samaritans did not welcome them, how did the disciples react to that? When they came back to give their report to Jesus, they said (Luke 9:52) “*Jesus, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them??*” That was their solution! Incinerate ‘em!

After the disciples ask that question, all Luke tells us is that Jesus rebuked them, and they went on their way. Whatever Jesus actually said was not recorded by Luke. But that was, and still is—as we know—the prevailing cultural mindset. Where you do hold grudges; you do get even and retaliate. Or even try to obliterate perceived enemies. The disciples weren’t yet seeing as Jesus sees. And he rebuked them and their attitude. But think of his rebukes like this as correctives to their vision; adjustments to their seeing. Jesus is saying to his followers, “Eventually you are going to see and live differently. I know, it’s odd. And it may be difficult for now. However, this is the Kingdom way.”

Initially, the reflexive reaction to Jesus’ blessings, and the rest of his teaching, was to say “no.” The disciples sure did this. We all do this. I do. It’s human nature. Which is why, by God’s grace, ***we have to learn how to see and think and do things that may not come naturally to us.*** We have to learn how to see and think and do things that may not come naturally to us—at least not right away. Because the natural reaction to a lot of Jesus’ teaching, if we take it to

heart, is to say... nah. Or not yet, or not me, or that sounds like a good idea, but what planet are you coming from, Jesus? Be realistic. C'mon. Like the disciples did at first.

But we know that over time these disciples began to say “yes.” It took them a little while—not until the middle of the book of Acts, especially in Acts 10 when the apostle Peter has a transformative experience, an aha moment, where he finally realized, “Oh; other people who aren’t like me **are** acceptable to God.” And it came by a vision, by the way; another corrective measure to Peter’s *seeing*. So it took them a while. And it may take us a while too—to learn to see as God sees, and affirm as blessed what & who God affirms as blessed, and then act accordingly.

As we go along in this series, I am going to invite us to pray a prayer regularly. The prayer is: “God, help me to see more of what you see; help me to see *as you see*.” I will be praying this, and I want to invite all of us to pray this prayer. For our sakes, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, and for the sake of our neighbors and communities, because that is how the healing of a fractured society will happen.

For the Healing of the Nations