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It would have been so easy to bypass today’s gospel lectionary text, the Beatitudes. They are **so** familiar. Hardwired as they are into many of our brains... Maybe even stitched onto a pillow or an embroidery sampler in our homes. If they were a song on the radio, we might say that they’ve been overplayed... And yet, perhaps such well-worn old friends are precisely the ones we need to revisit. Although familiarity can breed fondness... it can also obscure the true meaning, the depth and texture of its object. So let’s take another look, shall we?

What exactly does it mean to be **blessed**? Alternate translations substitute the words “**happy**,” “**fortunate**,” “**congratulations**,” and even, in one French version, “**debonair**.” None of these offers a whole lot more clarity than the New Revised Standard Version’s “blessed.” Perhaps this is in part because we have come to know blessings and fortunes and, dare I say, even happiness, as *quantifiable* or *material* in nature. **Blessings** equal *multitudes*, be it of **children** or **land** or **talent** or **money**. Blessings are things we *desire* and **aspire to**, some even going so far as to preach a gospel of **prosperity** that all but substitutes material wealth for the good news of God’s **healing, grace, forgiveness, and transformation** that Jesus brought to the world.

And if it is blessings and happiness we seek in this life, then surely this must be Jesus’ **prescription** for attaining God’s **favor** and achieving a state of **abundance**, *however* we quantify it... But, wait a second. **Poverty**, be it of **wallet** or **spirit** or **nourishment**, is hardly equivalent to fortune. And since when did **meekness** or **mercy** add up to any kind of **wealth** or

attention in this world? Worse yet, if we must **mourn** for our blessings, then that means we must **lose** what we hold most dear, cry our hearts out, and ache to the very depths of our beings. We know that we are mortal. We know that grieving is and will be a fact of our lives. But it is *hardly something we welcome*. **Dread** is more like it... And what about **peacemaking** and **righteousness** and the **persecution** that tend to accompany them? Peacemaking has some potential, but, I don't know about you, but I can think of few things I relish *less* than being persecuted. Not fun, to say the least. Essentially, these Beatitudes are **mixed blessings** at best.

So why would Jesus present to his fledgling followers such an unappealing to-do list? Well, we know that much of Jesus' ministry was about turning the world and its expectations **upside down**, of substituting *heaven's values* for those of the world. But even so, if **healing** and **transformation** are a big piece of what the historical Jesus and the risen Christ offer, intentionally setting ourselves up for impoverishment, grief, and persecution seems a bit **counterintuitive** at best. Right? For a time they might gain us the concerted attention and sympathy of our friends and family, perhaps even of our acquaintances. But not forever, and probably not in the way Jesus had in mind. There is a distinct difference between suffering for its own sake--suffering that points only toward ourselves--and suffering that is either completely unchosen... or a consequence of pointing toward **love, peace, and justice**; pointing toward **God** and the things that are of God. It's a distinct difference, yes, but sometimes difficult for we humans to discern nevertheless. And, not only that, but sometimes we **intentionally** misperceive, whether to justify our own predicaments or to justify what we have inflicted upon others. No doubt many a slave trader or owner **hid behind** these words of Jesus, justifying harsh treatment of human capital on earth secure in the knowledge that the next life would right the wrongs. And no doubt many a slave took *comfort* in Jesus' words, knowing his or her suffering was not for

nothing, that blessing and victory would indeed be theirs one day. But condoning cruelty, abuse, and inhumanity were **not at all** what Jesus had in mind. Quite the opposite.

As much as some of us would like to distance ourselves from Christianity when biblical interpretations twist and turn and lead us in this sort of a questionable direction, this is *precisely* where our presence as progressive, social justice Christians is most needed. For, as we see, it's not just the emphasis on weak and unhealthy states of being that have allowed teachings of Jesus like the Beatitudes to be *misinterpreted* and *misapplied*. It is, again, the language of **heaven**. Over the years, pushing ultimate rewards off until another life and place has seemingly granted permission to Christians to misuse one another and the earth. As though heaven alone were real and this earthly existence nothing but a throw-away, perhaps even an illusion. But we know the consequences are **real** and **not the will of a God of love**. After all, from the very beginning, God asked us to *care for* creation on God's behalf...

And we know now, too, that when Jews in Jesus' time spoke of "heaven," they spoke of God and the things of God. They used a synonym called "heaven" to avoid the dishonor that came with uttering God's unspeakably holy names aloud. As such, the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, is as much about **this life and this earth** as it is about a realm we have yet to enter and experience. There is **no biblical carte blanche** to frivolously abuse what God has so graciously and generously lent to us, not even *our own* minds, bodies, and spirits. We are *not* our own, and God wills us--and all creation--toward health... And so it's fair to say that we—as individuals and couples, families and church—were put here, not to **enable** or **excuse** one another's disease or dysfunction, but to **empower** and **encourage** one another toward **maximum, healthy functioning**. Not to sink into the bonds of **codependency**, but to rise into **interdependence**...

and to know the difference. **This** is the stuff of heaven; the redemptive, transformative gifts of God.

So why the Beatitudes seemingly mixed messages and blessings? What if we were to receive Jesus' words less as a **prescription** for a future state of being or as a conditional "if/then" statement than as a **description** of the existing state of affairs? Consider the context. Just one chapter earlier in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus had called his first four disciples. They **immediately** dropped their fishing nets and followed him. We don't know exactly why there was no hesitation on their parts. The author doesn't explain that to us. But one guess we might make is that Jesus' notoriety had already begun to spread throughout the region, including expectations around his identity—That he was the long-awaited Messiah, the political savior of the occupied Jewish people. This, of course, would have implied a level of power and prestige. Who wouldn't have wanted to jump on **that** bandwagon, to make history with Jesus? Yet the very next thing Jesus **did** was to take them throughout Galilee, teaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness among the people--pains, demons, epilepsy, and paralysis. And the next thing he **said** to them after the Beatitudes was that they are the **salt of the earth**. Yes, that *is* a compliment. When we speak of people as being the salt of the earth, we mean that they are good, well-intentioned persons of integrity who walk their talk. We also mean that they are down-to-earth and without pretense. All positive things. But **power** and **status** don't really factor into the equation. At all.

Walking amongst and offering God's healing to a rag-tag group of broken people, now **that is more like it** for a Messiah who turns *virtually everything* upside down. **This** is the ministry to

which Jesus called his disciples and, indeed, us. Perhaps these were Jesus' way of offering full disclosure to his followers about the true nature of the gig for which they had just signed on. Not that he wouldn't have to remind and redirect them—and us--again and again.

Even as these Beatitudes **proclaim** and **confirm** God's profound **love** and **compassion** for those who **suffer**, for those who are truly **neglected** or **ignored**, they also demonstrate God's **practical** priorities. They indicate that God makes the experience of God's self *particularly* available to those who have been mistreated or are in pain. And, indeed, frequently we see and feel no greater faith at work than in the sanctuaries of prisoners, 12-Step members, the poor, or the descendents of slaves. That is *at least a piece* of the blessedness that comes in *this* life, while standing in these unenviable places. The Beatitudes are also a work order of sorts for those of us who have committed to God's crew, the Church. As Christ's hands and feet, God's to-do list is also our own. But not *only* this. In the Beatitudes Jesus recognizes that this is no cushy job. We may not be grieving or poor in spirit or persecuted at this moment. But, if we're doing it right--if we're loving with all our hearts, strategizing with all our minds, and pushing toward justice and righteousness with all our might, at some point we're going to get our hearts and our spirits broken. We're going to make someone very angry and be persecuted. But we can proceed with confidence, knowing that God is particularly present in these moments. And not only that, but that one last translation of the word *bless* is **to heal**. Even as we are despised or depleted in body and soul, God is right there alongside us, healing us and healing our broken world.

And so let us hear Jesus' words again in a whole new way, as if for the first time, in Eugene Peterson's paraphrased translation, *The Message*:

¹ When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside.

Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him.

Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down ² and taught his climbing companions.

This is what he said:

³ "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope.

With less of you there is more of God and God's rule.

⁴ "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you.

Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

⁵ "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

⁶ "You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God.

God is food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

⁷ "You're blessed when you care.

At the moment of being 'carefull,' you find yourselves cared for.

⁸ "You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right.

Then you can see God in the outside world.

⁹ "You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight.

That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

¹⁰ "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution.

The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

¹¹ "Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me.

What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. ¹² You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, I do!

And all heaven applauds.

And know that you are in good company.

My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

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Amen.