

**All Saints Sunday
November 6, 2022
Southampton, MA**

Scripture: Luke 6:20-31

The Beatitudes are one of my go-to scriptures when I work with people who are dying or with families as I plan their loved one's funeral, especially when Christianity was a big part of the dying or deceased's life, but not so much with the family.

The beatitudes are a collection of sayings using a literary form known as a macarism, taken from the Greek word *makarios*, meaning happy or blessed. Though beatitudes begin with the word blessed or happy, they are not the same as blessings. Rather, they are expressions of praise or congratulations.

We're probably most familiar with the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12). Luke's beatitudes from the Sermon on the Plain are less familiar. These are not the only ones. The Hebrew Bible has 45 beatitudes many of which are found in Psalms and Proverbs. Including the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain, there are 37 beatitudes in the New Testament, including additional ones in other parts of Matthew and Luke.

They're appropriate for use around death because they are expressions of praise. Their structure is comforting, part one begins with an assurance that noting their situation they are blessed and part two is the resolution, typically positive and reassuring, such as "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

Of course, for the dying, the resolution is afterlife with God, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Any pain and suffering will come to an end. Life's turmoil and anxiety will end. As Jesus said, "surely your reward is great in heaven." (Luke 6:23a)

The afterlife with God is Christianity's neat and tidy way to resolve the messiness inherent to mortal life. Knowing this gives us hope that though our situation in this world is terrible, it will not be forever because our suffering ends when we die. We underscore this with Paul's commentary on suffering coupled with God's love for us, referring to Jesus, "through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:2-5)

That's all well and good, but it is highly problematic. As glorious and promising the beatitudes sound, they have the potential to promulgate and perpetuate injustice. Enslaved people's owners abused and mistreated them. The belief in an afterlife that ends suffering and is a reward for a moral life ameliorated their guilt. Note that the owners did not see slavery as immoral as it was in scripture. On the flip side, afterlife's reward gave enslaved people hope that their suffering will not be forever, and that it will end. Listen to the text to **O Freedom**, an African-American spiritual:

“Oh, freedom, oh, freedom, oh freedom over me,
And before I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my
Lord and be free

“No more moaning, no more moaning, no more moaning over me,
And before I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my
Lord and be free

“There'll be singing, there'll be singing, there'll be singing over me,
And before I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my
Lord and be free

“There’ll be shouting, there’ll be shouting, there’ll be shouting over me,
And before I’d be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave, and go home to my
Lord and be free

There’ll be praying, there’ll be praying, there’ll be praying over me,
And before I’d be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave, and go home to my
Lord and be free”¹

Let’s not limit ourselves to the narrow definition of America’s sin. It’s here today. It thrives when public policies work to keep people poor, to leave them unhoused, to deny them medical care, to accept begging as appropriate to address food insecurity. It is all too evident as racism and antisemitism by political leaders go unchallenged. It is tolerated when we cannot address undocumented immigration beyond keeping “them” out. Of course, all gets resolved in heaven.

The woes were warning flags. Just as suffering was temporary, so was thriving and flourishing. Through the woes, Jesus reminded the people that though they will be filled now, they will be hungry. Though they may laugh now, they will mourn and weep.

Life is not stable or consistent or reliable. Events can happen which can upset all that we know. The aftermath of Hurricane Ian. The pandemic. What will happen to the economy, and by extension our lives, if the United States doesn’t raise its debt ceiling and goes into default?

The woes warn us not to become complacent in their own security. They remind us that we have a stake to ensure that all people will have their daily bread. They obligate us to work so that people will not be poor, whether it is poor financially, spiritually, or socially. They remind us that we can be poor, too.

When Luke included “now” in his beatitudes, it wasn’t only to comfort the afflicted. It was a call to everyone to make possible the kingdom of God now.

¹ African American Spiritual. Oh Freedom (No. 208). **This Far By Faith**. Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis
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Recall that when he answered the Pharisee who asked when the kingdom of God was coming, he said, “the kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke 18:21b) His reference to heaven was not some place after we die. We know this also when he answered his disciples who asked, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples,” to which he replied, “When you pray, say: Father hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, Give us each day our daily bread, And forgive us our sins.” (Luke 11:2b-4a) The kingdom of God is on earth. As we know from the words we pray every week, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

The kingdom of God comes among us when we abide by Jesus’ teachings. Furthermore, living out those teachings demands that we go below the words we read and hear. We must delve deep into our hearts. We must read them with our hearts. We must undergird Jesus’ teachings with love. Then, God’s will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The kingdom of God among us relies upon each of us to make it real.

It’s also not easy. We have stuff, fear, anxiety, envy, greed, anger those aspects of our humanity that get in the way of love, humility, compassion, generosity, kindness... It’s the gap between who we are and who God calls us to be.

Nevertheless, we must try. We must take small steps each day. We must remember that what we have now can change, whether we are suffering or thriving. We must remember that we cannot cross the gap alone because the kingdom of God will finally arrive when everyone has a place at the God’s table, when everyone has fullness, when everyone laughs, and all will be blessed.