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Matthew 5:1-12

### Beatitude Shifts

About ten years ago, I went to a women's preaching seminar at Union Seminary in New York. It was a small group, facilitated by Barbara Lundblad, a Lutheran pastor whom I adore. One of the things that Barbara had us do was to travel with Scripture to different places in the city in order to dislocate it. For example, part of our group was sent to read their passage while traveling on the New York subway. Some of our group was sent to hear it while sitting in a Laundromat. I went with a couple of women to a restaurant in Spanish Harlem, where we ate lunch and read the Palm Sunday story, listening to how it sounded in that space.

All of it was done out of the recognition that our environment, consisting of both people and place, is a conversation partner when we read Scripture. So mixing it up, taking some risks, doing things differently might just open us up to our God-breathed stories in new ways. I tell you all of that because it is what the Beatitudes and I did on Thursday. Last Thursday, as I was abiding in this text, I decided to take it around Asheville to see what might happen. How might Jesus' familiar words of Blessing, words I have seen needle pointed on more pillows than I can count, how would those words sound when dislocated? Would being in different places and around different people help me hear God's Word afresh?

The first place the Scripture and I traveled was to a street corner near the Diana Wortham theatre. It was about 18 degrees so I sat in the car and watched men on the park bench having a conversation. Many of them carried the gear I usually see with those who do not have permanent housing—backpacks, duffel bags, layers of coats. They were all standing there in the wind, shifting from foot to foot, talking with each other and watching people pass by.

I sat and read these blessings from Jesus and wondered how they sounded to men without homes, who were dealing with the elements, and being watched by a preacher from her warm car. Did they sound too full of piety—too far removed from their every day existence when simply finding a safe place to stay the night took all the energy they had? Would these words from Jesus offer any hope or communicate a sense of God's presence?

Full disclosure: For this exercise to be most effective, I really needed to get out of my car, go over to them, and engage them in a conversation about the Scripture. That kind of openness would have created even more space for God's Spirit to move. But I did not do that. I rarely approach a group of men I do not know, regardless if they are wearing suits and ties, or camouflage. If another woman had been around, I might have had the courage. But there wasn't and so I didn't. Instead, I sat and prayed and wondered.

After I stayed there for a while, the Beatitudes and I then went to the Solace center—Care Partners Hospice facility. I went there to see Hilda Hobson, but first, the beatitudes and I had another conversation. What did these blessings sound like in a space full of grief and peace, fear and comfort, death and life? Were they helpful words in the valley of the shadow of death, or did they sound too "sweet by and by-like" for people who might be afraid of the dying process or for their families worn thin by grief?

Finally, the Beatitudes and I traveled to the mall. We went and sat on a bench, surrounded by mall walkers and employees, parents with young kids, and teenagers celebrating another snow day. And as I sat and once again pondered these words of blessings, I noticed I was hemmed in on every side by other messages--messages that proclaimed our real blessings come from what we can buy, own, and wear. And I wondered what these words from Jesus would sound like to tweens going into Abercrombie and Fitch, or to women headed into Ulta Beauty store. Would they challenge, comfort, or just sound irrelevant in that place?

By that point of the day, I was running late so I packed up Jesus' words of blessings and started my way back to Black Mountain. I admit I felt frustrated with myself for not engaging the others I saw in the study with me. I firmly believe God speaks most clearly through God's Living Word when we pray, learn, and listen together. But honestly, last Thursday, I did not have the courage or the stamina to open myself up to strangers. Maybe you have those days or moments too. But just as I admitted my frustration with myself, to myself, it hit me.

I had not been brave enough to discuss these pronouncements of blessings with all those folks I did not know, but there was something about abiding in those Beatitudes while being in those different places, that had honestly done some work on me. At least for a while, I felt reshaped, sort of reoriented, in the way I even thought about all those I had seen on that day.

And that discovery caused me to wonder if that is part of why Jesus preached the Beatitudes to his disciples and to the crowd. Jesus was busily reshaping, reorienting, all those listening, away from the reign of Rome, of Empire, of Death, to the reign of God. And he was embodying God's reign by pronouncing God's favor on those who society usually regards as the ones left behind. Yet he was not using conditional language, with if/then clauses like: "If you are mournful enough, then you will be comforted. Of you really give meekness all you've got, then you will inherit the earth." And neither was he treating the beatitudes as exhortations, things we can attain if we just roll up our sleeves and try harder.

Instead, Jesus spoke his words of blessing using performative language. That means when Jesus pronounced the blessings, he actually was making the blessings happen right then and there, as well as in the future. When Jesus said "blessed are," he was announcing that the Divine, the Holy, the Great I AM, is present with those whom Jesus names, was on their side right then and there, and would be forever. That is what "blessed" means in this passage. So who did Jesus bless, and how might God's Spirit reshape, reorient us, through our communal abiding in this text, like it did with that original crowd.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, Jesus begins. Blessed are those who come to God with empty hands rather than a clenched fist, ready to find their identity and security in God, rather than in themselves<sup>1</sup>, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And blessed are those who mourn, those who find themselves not just in grief over personal loss, but who also lament the way things are in the world; those whose hearts break because of the injustice, the violence, the evil they see or know themselves. Blessed are those weepers, those open-hearted ones, for they will be comforted. And blessed are the meek, those who patiently wait for God to get God's good in gear, trusting

knowing, believing God will indeed act in God's time. They are blessed and they will inherit the earth.

And blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, Jesus proclaims. Blessed are those who long for God to make things right, who are not satisfied with the ways things are, for all is not well just yet. But they will be filled. And blessed are the merciful, those who know that Mercy listens, gets into the other's skin, and lets their tears wet your shoulders. Blessed are those Mercy makers, for they will receive mercy themselves. Blessed are the pure in heart, those who do not let themselves get carved up in a million pieces with a million different claims on their souls, but whose loyalty is to God alone. Blessed are those for they will see God.

And blessed, Jesus preaches, blessed are those peacemakers, those intent on not returning evil for evil, those who know that peace is not simply the absence of violence but the reordering of the world to reflect God's reign of peace. Blessed are those who make, not just seek, peace, for they will be called children of God. And blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, those who know that to live with one's loyalty to God's reign instead off to the reign of empire will stir up a heap of trouble in this world—they, too, are blessed and will participate in nothing less than the kingdom of heaven. And blessed are y'all, Jesus shifts, getting personal now, when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for they do not have the last word.

And then I bet Jesus took a deep breath before continuing with the metaphors of salt and light. But as we reach the end of this section, with these pronounced and enacted blessings, we see Jesus showing us that one of God's desires is to bless all those who there is no reason in the world they should be blessed, at least not according to our world. All those Jesus names in the first part of each beatitude (the meek, the peacemakers, etc)—they are the ones our world leaves behind. But God doesn't. Because that is just who God is. Remember—we believe our God entered into our time and history as a baby. That should have been our first clue that God was not interested in our business as usual.

Rather, Jesus is trying to get our attention away from the business as usual perspective that has its own kind of beatitudes, to be sure: beatitudes like: \*Blessed are the thin and beautiful, for they will define what is good and worthy. \*Blessed are the famous, for they will get all the attention. \*Blessed are those who stoke fear and mistrust amongst people, polarizing and politicizing everything, for they will get a lot of time in the spotlight and their power will grow exponentially. Those are our world's beatitudes, the empire's beatitudes. But with the entire Sermon on the Mount, beginning with these beatitudes, Jesus is trying to help his disciples see and know that bowing down to those claims, to the empire's promise of blessing, will do nothing but lead us into emptiness and death. And that is not who we are. That is not who we are called to be. We are not a people who are only into life for ourselves. We are not a people who will tolerate our hearts becoming hardened to those in need, or to our own pain. We are not a people who will just throw up our hands and say "Never mind. Good luck God. I'm out." No. We are a beatitude people.

We are people who are bound and determined to let the Spirit steep us in the way that God sees the world, in the counterintuitive blessings Jesus proclaims. We are a people who are bound and

determined to be as open as we can for God's reshaping and reorienting of our hearts. We are a people who hope with all we've got that one day, by the power of God's Spirit, we will live more fully into the light of our baptisms. We will let God's beatitude kind of world sink more deeply into our souls and change more intensely our perceptions of others and ourselves, as well as our behavior. And I know this because I have experienced it.

That is my testimony from Thursday. I know I have a long way to go on the discipleship journey, but driving home on Thursday afternoon, I realized as I had watched the men on the street corner engage in lively conversation, I had genuinely wondered what they might have taught me about Jesus' words. The self-protection barriers I normally put up between me and them were lowered. I was less suspicious and more curious as to who they were and how they experienced or didn't experience God's presence. And that was a shift, a beatitude shift.

And as I walked into Solace that afternoon, the words "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" lodged themselves in my heart. And I noticed I was moving through that hospice space on the lookout, on alert, for God's peace, God's blessing, God's comfort being experienced by those moving into their deaths and by those sitting at bedside. Rather than my normal posture of praying for those things to happen, I had a posture of assuming those things were happening. I just needed to be awake enough to notice it. And that was a shift, a beatitude shift.

I even had a different perspective sitting on that bench in the mall. I realized I was much clearer about all the other messages of "not enough" plastered all around. Jesus' beatitudes had sharpened my vision to see what claims on me were true and what claims on me were not. And that was a shift, a beatitude shift.

But I don't think I would have experienced my day in the same way had Scripture not been working on me, if the Beatitudes and I had not traveled around town that day. I realized that taking the time and energy to abide in the Beatitudes had given me a very different perspective on what I expected to encounter and how I felt about it all.

So what about you? Don't you wonder what your testimony might be if you were to spend some time abiding in Jesus' upside down, counterintuitive blessings called Beatitudes? How might God's Spirit reshape you, reorient you, away from the empty beatitudes of this world, to the fullness of life beatitudes of God's world? I dare you to find out. For no matter what, you will be blessed.

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<sup>i</sup> These different descriptions owe a lot to Jessica Tate and her 2010 paper on this text for The Well. In particular, her description of Mercy and how it gets in the other's skin is powerful to me.