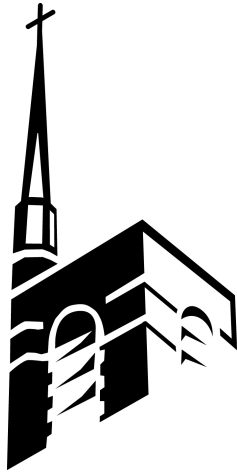


September 1, 2013



A Dream Cruise Through the Beatitudes:
**“YOU WERE NEVER PROMISED A
ROSE GARDEN”**

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Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12)

We are coming to the end of our Dream Cruise through the Beatitudes. I feel a little bit like the police who shoo the cars off of Woodward at the close of the Cruise. I also feel somewhat like the anchor man in a relay race which has had five different preachers reflecting on the Beatitudes.

Pastor Laurie Haller set the pace with the opening reflection on the first beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Laurie said in that opening sermon: “As preachers we are told, ‘Open and close your sermon well, and it doesn’t matter what you say in between; no one will remember anyway.’” I take that as a challenge to finish this series well; however I do not accept that what was said in between doesn’t matter. It does! So I want to recap each of the previous reflections and then try to close with some comments on the last beatitude: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” But first I want to apologize to all the preachers who preceded me in the series, as the following are my takeaways. You may have others.

To refresh your memories, Pastor Laurie Haller opened this series, introducing us to the first beatitude: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’”

She informed us that the Beatitudes were “difficult and challenging” words, which was confirmed each week in this series. We were introduced to the concept that blessedness “is the result of a right relationship with God” and that the Beatitudes paint a picture of the Kingdom of God. “Poverty of spirit is an inner emptiness that can only be filled by God. Blessed are you when you recognize just how frail you are without God’s strength.” Blessed are the poor in spirit!

The second beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” was addressed by Pastor Gary Haller who asked us to examine our own conscience. Pastor Gary postulated that “each and every one of us have personally experienced the brokenness of the world and sin in our own lives. These are experiences we need to mourn. Although we present on the surface that we have it all together, the reality is often different,” because if you are like me, you have been enculturated to be stoic and keep a stiff upper lip! Nonetheless, “those who sorrow deeply are close, very close to the heart of God. It is at the point of utter vulnerability when we see our need for God and that God is finally able to come near us. Jesus is advising us that those who go through the valley of mourning and get to the other side come out with a new strength, a new depth, a deeper understanding of life, a greater ability to empathize with others, a new power to help others.” Blessed are those who mourn!

In week three, Pastor Laurie explored the third beatitude: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Perhaps this one troubles us the most in our take-charge culture. Are we Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter, or Superman, combating the world’s evil? She called us to decide what kind of person we want to be and how God is calling us to make a better world. “The meek who will inherit the earth are nonviolent, gracious and gentle in their dealings with others because they have humbled themselves before the greatness of God. The meek are therefore compassionate yet direct. They are humble yet self-integrated. They are courteous yet insistent about wrestling with injustice.” The African concept of *Ubuntu*, “I am because, you are,” was lifted up with the example of Nelson Mandela’s leadership from incarceration to the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation committee to heal the wounds of the past, not with retribution but with honest listening to the hurts and asking for forgiveness. Blessed are the meek!

In week four, our Duke intern, Jessica Lowe, addressed the fourth beatitude: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” She pointed out that we are talking about “God’s righteousness – a bringing about of justice, a righting of wrongs, a time when suffering and pain will be put to an end and there will be peace given to all.” In a word, a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. “Blessed” was defined at the beginning of this series as “finding the right way on God’s path, as the relationship we have with God.” Jessica went on to say that blessing has two parts: it is both a gift and a task. “It is a gift to have compassion and empathy, a gift to be able to look into the world and see the injustice that abounds and to look into people’s eyes and see their pain. But there is a task that comes with the gift – a task to take action, to not sit idly by and ignore what other people are experiencing.” Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness!

Pastor Gary addressed the fifth beatitude: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” “Mercy is what God is about! When we are merciful to others, it is ourselves who are transformed. Mercy is the cure for injury. It brings healing to others when we share it – and it heals us, too. God shows us mercy beyond anything we deserve. It is the great truth of life that in other people we see the reflection of ourselves. To be merciful is to be Godlike.” Blessed are the merciful!

The sixth beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,” was addressed by Pastor Laurie with the provocative question: “What is in your heart? Who are the pure in heart?”

They are those who are working with God in this world. The pure in heart are those who do the right things for the right reasons. We were invited to clear our hearts to get in touch with the image of God that resides in each of us. If we want to see God, we need to clear out the clutter in our life that prevents us from seeing God.” What is the clutter in your life that needs to be cleared away? Let go and let God, as the saying goes. Blessed are the pure in heart!

Pastor Lindsey Hall introduced us to the seventh beatitude: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” She advised us that peace is “*shalom*, which means wholeness, wellbeing.” “We are called to wholeness in our relationship to God. We cannot be givers of peace unless we experience peace with God and peace with ourselves. Peace comes from letting go of our unhealthy habits, letting go of our need for perfection and control, saying I’m sorry and asking for God’s forgiveness.” Pastor Lindsey led the congregation through a clenched fist exercise, inviting us to unclench our fists and receive peace from God, as God wants us to release our tight grip on the things of the world which distract us. Blessed are the peacemakers!

Finally, last week Pastor Gary examined the eighth beatitude: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Here we learn that while all the other beatitudes seem to be talking about other people, this one suddenly turns on us. “Blessed are YOU.” Persecution was illustrated by the story of Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson, Number 42. He stressed that the Christian life was not meant to be easy, and if you have been following this series, you will understand. Jesus is advising us that “no one promised you a rose garden.” “When we follow Jesus, we are going to rub the world the wrong way,” as Jackie Robinson’s experience so gloriously exemplifies. “We are called to do good, to do right even when the world scorns and reviles us. The joy of doing right is not for our sake but for God’s.” Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake!

This week it is my turn to examine the final beatitude: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Kierkegaard contrasts being an admirer of Jesus and a true follower:

The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe...he renounces nothing... Not so for the follower... The follower aspires with all his strength, with all his will to be what he admires...and because of the follower’s life, it will become evident who the admirers are, for the admirers will become agitated with him.

(From *The Power of a Focused Heart* by Mary Lou Redding, p. 107)

Examples of commonplace actions that might cause you to be reviled include calling someone out who tells a racist or a filthy joke or speaking out in a meeting with a call for justice that is controversial. Whatever our individual actions for Christ that arouse the wrath of the kingdoms of the world, this beatitude promises an eternal result! The first and eighth beatitudes both end with “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Persecution is not the end of the story!

I would like to focus on the word “reviled,” which is addressed to us specifically! The fact that Jesus has twice reiterated that we are blessed for being persecuted suggests a signal to us of its importance and the need to pay attention.

Have you ever been reviled for practicing your faith? Two more baseball stories demonstrate religious courage in daring to be different. The first concerns Tigers legend “Hank Greenberg’s decision not play on Yom Kippur, one of Judaism’s High Holy Days of repentance, and instead go to synagogue to pray instead of play, a bold move when the Tigers were in a hot pennant race in 1934.” In my lifetime I remember a similar choice made by Dodger ace Sandy Koufax, perhaps baseball’s best left handed pitcher ever, to sit out the first game of the World Series which he would have pitched against the Minnesota Twins, also on Yom Kippur. (From the book *Baseball as Road to God* by John Sexton)

Have you ever had to make a decision in observing your faith that that caused you to miss an important business meeting or sales call? My grandfather, Cecil Samuel Quainton, was Dean of the Anglican Christ Church Cathedral in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada from 1917 to 1937. Victoria is as about as English a town as there is, including in England, with the Anglican Church at the core of its civil and religious culture. My grandfather was a civil as well as a religious leader. During the twenties the English and Irish were battling in a religious war whose repercussions are still being felt, for example in Northern Ireland’s bitter feud between Catholics and Protestants. Given that context, when my father, his son, was courting my mother, the daughter of a staunch Irish Catholic family, it was a public scandal because even in the 1920’s Catholics were marginalized in Victoria. My grandfather was so castigated in public that he had to say from the pulpit at the time of their engagement “that I would rather my son marry a devout practicing Catholic than a mediocre practicing Anglican!” My family modeled for me to stand firm in my faith, even at the most inconvenient times. Have you ever been reviled for your faith? Blessed are you when people revile you!

What, then, have we learned on this Cruise through the Beatitudes?

- We know they are both difficult and challenging.
- We have been given a road map for the Kingdom of God which includes practicing mercy, shalom, justice.
- We are to seek God’s righteousness in the world.
- We are called to be in right relationship to God.
- We are to understand blessedness as both a gift and a task.
- We are to empty our hearts so God can fill them.
- We were never promised a rose garden!

As we cross the finish line of our series and clear the last car off of Woodward, we can move on to the September sermon series, “Uniquely Called!”