

“On Not Being a Rattlesnake”
February 18, 2024

Isaiah 51:1-5
Matthew 5:1-12

On Ash Wednesday, we began our Lenten preparations for the joy of Easter by hearing the grace-filled invitation of Jesus: “Turn and believe the good news.”

Those words raise the question: just what is this “good news” that we are called to believe?

The Sermon on the Mount has been called “the epitome of the good news.” So, we might benefit from spending some time with *those* words of Jesus in these weeks before Easter. In doing so, we might hear and believe the good news that comes to us.

I will have a few words of warning, however. Perhaps there should always be a warning when we turn to the scriptures.

It’s been said that the most dangerous passages in the Bible are the familiar ones, because we do not really listen to them.¹ If that is the case, then we are entering into very dangerous territory indeed. Many of us are so familiar with these teachings of Jesus that we risk missing the good news even as we hear the words.

If you are not familiar with the Sermon on the Mount, you might be at an advantage.

At the same time, there is also a danger in listening to these words and *really hearing* them.

In the preface to his 1979 novel, *Jailbird*, onetime University of Iowa writing instructor, the late Kurt Vonnegut, told of a lunch that he had in 1945 with Powers Hapgood, a Harvard graduate and nationally known labor organizer who came from a wealthy family in Vonnegut’s home town of Indianapolis.

Hapgood had been arrested and jailed several times. Just that morning, he had been in court, testifying about violence on a picket line some months before. Describing that morning’s time in court, Hapgood said that the Judge asked him “why would a man from such a distinguished family and with such a fine education choose to live as you do?”

“Why?” Hapgood said he answered, “Because of The Sermon on the Mount, sir.”

Because of the Sermon on the Mount.

Consider yourself forewarned as we move through these three challenging chapters in the Gospel of Matthew. If you listen and *hear*, they may change the way to you choose to live.

Jesus begins these dangerous words with a word of blessing.

Now, I’ve told you before about my dislike and suspicion of that word. But at its best, a blessing expresses the desire for more life—a hope that the one who is blessed will know well-being, peace, and general success in life’s ventures. It is a sincere wish that another person will prosper. As such, a blessing is a form of love.

In scripture the word of blessing is not spoken casually—as it often is today. A blessing reminds us that we are created in God’s image. It calls us to live up to our high human potential. And blessing calls us to recognize the divine image in our neighbor as well, for part of our humanity is the active desire to build a world in which all people might live in peace and enjoy their days.

We use the word “blessed” as an approximation for the Greek word *makarios*, which is difficult to translate. Homer said that the immortals of Mt. Olympus were *makarios*. In secular contexts the word seems to suggest being fortunate. We might say “How lucky!” or “Congratulations!” to get a feeling for this condition that we call “blessed.”

Then the words of Jesus would come to us in this way:

Congratulations!—you who are poor in spirit, or mourning, or meek.

How lucky!—you who are hungry, or reviled, or persecuted.

Now, you would think that anyone with basic human decency would not speak like this. Where, after all, is the good fortune in being meek or persecuted, in our mourning or hunger?

And yet, we listen as Jesus tells just such people: “Blessed are you.”

And here is another warning about another danger: beware of hearing those words as a command. We can hear words of blessing and think that that we are called to become poor in spirit, or meek, or persecuted. We can think that if we find ourselves among the crushed, the meek, or those who grieve over injustice that we have some sort of “Christian duty” to remain that way.

Jesus is not telling us to go out become such people. Jesus instead speaks to those who find themselves in these various life situations—and I don’t think that his list is meant to be all inclusive. Some have been active—making peace, pursuing what is right to the point of persecution, showing mercy. Others passively find themselves sorrowing, hungering, or thirsting.

No one individual will find himself or herself described by all these words—but taken together they paint a picture of a Christian congregation.

Those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful—you know people like that. You might even be sitting next to one of them this morning. Or maybe you would number yourself among those who know what sorrow means, who claim nothing, who make peace.

If you will—if you dare—listen more carefully to these words. Jesus invites us to take life as it is, to look at it closely and deeply. And looking, we might discover that there is indeed something “fortunate,” something “blessed” about simply being alive—whatever our circumstances. As Jesus begins to teach his followers, he calls them—and calls us—into the joy of being alive with all of the difficulties and possibilities that come to us.

Blessed are you, Jesus says. More life is coming to you when:

You are poor in spirit.

You mourn.

You are meek.

You hunger and thirst.

Do you start to recognize yourself as Jesus talks?

Blessed are you, Jesus says. How happy are those who are:

Merciful.

Pure in heart.

Peacemakers

Persecuted.

Do you find yourself somewhere in those descriptions?

These are living words, speaking still to you and me. To our situations Jesus speaks words of promise—words that can be trusted. His words seem to look toward the future. He speaks of fulfillment to come. But Jesus speaks, as he always does, as one with authority, as one whose word is dependable.

. . .they will be comforted.

. . .they will inherit the earth.

. . . they will be filled.

. . .they will receive mercy.

This is the promise of good fortune, of happiness, of *blessing* which might now be lacking in your life. This promise is spoken in the face of deprivation and longing. This promise is spoken in situations that offer no hope in them.

Consider specifically those words: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” We understand hunger. We understand thirst. We understand the emptiness. The hungry person thinks only of food; the mind of one who is thirsty is set only on water.

We might also know the deep hunger and thirst for righteousness.

This is not a desire to be a do-gooder or for self-righteousness. This is the deep desire for right relationships between people, for generosity, for goodwill, for compassion, for justice, and, yes, for the mercy that is part of all real justice. It should come as no surprise then, that, like the prophet Isaiah, when Jesus speaks of righteousness he is talking both about seeking to do the will of God *and* also knowing that ultimately it is God who will make things right, who will fulfill this desire.

Jesus describes a deep human hunger and thirst. And he tells us this is not an empty hope—for this is the way in which God is working to redeem our lives and our world—gathering up what falls short.

The realm of God is close at hand. This is good news because nothing is lost to God. The One who created forgets nothing that has been created.

Your sorrow is not lost.

Your hunger for the good is not forgotten.

Your acts of mercy and peace, even though they seem fruitless are held by God, gathered up and made good.

The Beatitudes are usually rendered as statements, and so we heard them this morning: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the realm of heaven.” The Greek, however, states them as exclamations, ecstatic utterances of present reality, literally: “Now happiness and the realm of heaven for those poor in spirit!” “Now mercy of those who are merciful.”ⁱⁱ

As Jesus speaks and as we listen carefully, tomorrow becomes today. It is *now* that Jesus calls us “blessed.”

This is the good news: Even now, God is breaking into this world with mercy, with comfort, with abundance, with fulfillment. Even now the Realm of God is breaking into the world. That reshapes how we understand our lives in this present time. It is no longer a matter of waiting for good things. The goodness of God is coming toward us even in the most difficult situations.

The beatitudes are not about taking on added requirements for living, but about becoming transformed people. They are not about doing more things or different things or difficult things. They are about following the way that we know and the way that is being made known to us—and on that way we might find the happiness that is a blessing to our neighbors, a blessing to the hurting world, and a blessing even to ourselves.

This brings me back to Kurt Vonnegut. Not a conventionally religious person in any sense, he nevertheless once told a congregation: “I am enchanted by the Sermon on the Mount. Being merciful, it seems to me, is the only good idea we have received so far. Perhaps we will get another idea that good by and by – and then we will have two good ideas.” And he added: “If it weren’t for the message of mercy and pity in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, I wouldn’t want to be human being. I would just as soon be a rattlesnake.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The mercy of God, the fulfillment of God—the very *blessing* of God is upon you.

Believe the good news, Jesus says.

Live as though that good news is the deep truth of this world, the deep truth of your life.

You need not be a rattlesnake.

You can be human—fully human.

You are blessed.

ⁱ John Meier, *Interpretation*, July 1990, pg. 281

ⁱⁱ Peter Gomes, *Sermons*, pg. 116

ⁱⁱⁱ Dan Wakefield <https://salo.iu.edu/index.php/our-smart-friends/kurt-vonnegut-christ-loving-atheist/>