

Unexpected Blessings...and Great Expectations

Sermon prepared by the Rev. Douglas Clark for August 2, 2015 – Ordinary 18 - Communion

First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

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.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the

same? Be [generous with your love], therefore, as your heavenly Father is [generous with love for you].”

Matthew 5:1-10, 43-48

W. H. Auden: “We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for I don't know.”

“If equal affection cannot be, let the more loving be me.”¹

Matthew's narrative of Jesus' ministry tells us that “great crowds followed [Jesus],” both at the beginning and at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (4:24; 8:1). These “great crowds” of followers were attracted to Jesus for two significant reasons: his **fame** as a teacher and preacher and healer (4:24); and the **authority** of his teaching (7:29).

Who were those “great crowds”; and what was everyday life like for them? As many studies of first-century life in Galilee have shown, these “great crowds” were probably composed mostly of local villagers who were caught in “circumstances of severe economic hardship.”²

A variety of forces conspired to create this context of poverty. The Roman occupying forces, and their collaborators, had created a society in which there was no “middle class.” Almost all of the people in Galilee were extremely poor; there were only a few who were extremely wealthy. Jewish tithes, Herodian taxes, and Roman tribute had driven almost everyone into heavy debt.

When villagers had to forfeit what little land they owned in order to pay off their debts, the beneficiaries were the extremely wealthy, who continued to add to their large estates. The wealthy then hired these villagers as day laborers to work in the very fields and vineyards they had once owned. As we can easily imagine, those who were poor resented those who were wealthy.

As we can also readily imagine, poverty created all kinds of personal and social problems among those who were impoverished. “Not surprisingly, in such desperate economic circumstances, some people are at each other's throats, [begging,] hating, cursing, abusing.” Not surprisingly, some of the people caught in these circumstances suffer from psychological and physiological illnesses. Not surprisingly, people caught in such desperate economic circumstances are hungry, not only for food, but also for liberation, for restorative justice, for the overthrow of their oppressors. Moreover, these are the same people whose ancestors once lived in similar circumstances long ago in Egypt—and who were set free by God working through Moses.

1 http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/w/w_h_auden.html#S7ueowqAvLM3PkGK.99

2 Richard A. Horsley, “Ethics and exegesis : 'love your enemies' and the doctrine of non-violence,” *JAAAR* 54 no 1 Spr 1986, p 3-31.

When John the Baptist and Jesus the Galilean began their ministries by proclaiming the nearness, the imminence, of the reign of God (which would mean the end of the reign of Caesar and Herod), it's not the least bit surprising that "great crowds" would be attracted to these prophetic figures. When Jesus went up the hillside in Galilee to teach his disciples, and anyone else who would listen to him, it's not surprising that "great crowds" would flock to him and think of him as a new Moses.

What is surprising, of course, is the content of his teaching. To those who were poor and humiliated and oppressed and persecuted, he said, "You are joyfully blessed by God, for the reign of God is coming to set you free. And as you wait for the fulfillment of God's promise, you can begin to practice among yourselves what life will be like in the coming time of fulfillment. You can become the beloved community."

To all who would follow him, then and now, Jesus says: I am giving you a new identity. You are God's blessed children. Now you have to live into that new identity. Here are some examples of what God expects of you. These are great expectations. As you work to fulfill these expectations, you will become the people that God wants you to become, the people that God needs you to become.

To all who would follow him, Jesus said, "I know you get angry at one another. But don't let your anger determine your actions. Lashing out in anger will only threaten the already fragile bonds of solidarity among you. Instead of retaliating against someone you're angry at, seek to be reconciled instead. Seek to live into your new identity as a peacemaker.

I know you struggle with inappropriate sexual desires. So did my ancestor King David, when he lusted after Bathsheba and got her pregnant and arranged for her husband to be killed. So don't let your lust destroy your marriage or your neighbor's marriage. Don't think that just because you're a man you can take advantage of women. Adultery will only threaten the already fragile bonds of solidarity among you.

To all who would follow him, Jesus said, "You have been taught that it's OK to return evil for evil, as long as it's only an equivalent evil. Retaliation is not allowed to be any greater than the original harm that was done to you. But what I'm teaching you is not to retaliate at all.

"You know when a Roman soldier orders you to carry his heavy pack for a mile? You'd really like to tell him off, but he has power over you, and he could do a lot worse to you. So here's what you do: turn your resentment into non-violent resistance. Carry his pack a second mile, to show him that you're his equal."

To all who would follow him, Jesus said, "I know that you have been taught to love your neighbor. But here's something else: your enemy is also your neighbor. So what God wants of you, because this is God's very nature, is to love your enemies as

well as your friends and fellow Israelites. And the best way to love your enemies is not to retaliate when they do harm to you. Show them that there's a different way. Show them that non-retaliation is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets.”

In his book *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance*, Glen H. Stassen writes persuasively that Jesus is not here condemning such emotions as anger and lust. Jesus' teachings, Stassen argues, “realistically diagnose the vicious cycles, the repressed anger, the broken relationships, the isolation, even the violence in which we are stuck because of our captivity to self-defeating habits or ways of domination.” These teachings also offer “a realistic way of deliverance from the cycles of domination that Jesus diagnoses.”³

The Sermon on the Mount is all about what life is like in the kingdom of God. Jesus' teaching about kingdom life begins in an unexpected way with unexpected blessings. For Jesus to proclaim that the poor in spirit or the meek or the merciful or the peacemakers are blessed by God is to run counter to most of our human cultural or religious expectations. We assume that God's blessing is found in experiences of power and prosperity. “Not so,” says Jesus, who offers unexpected blessings.

Similarly, when Jesus offers to his disciples “realistic ways of deliverance” from the vicious cycles of violence that cause so much harm, both to individuals and to communities, he is lifting up “great expectations” that turn out to be very effective in practice. These “great expectations” are not impossible ideals, but rather practical ways of aligning ourselves with what God is doing in the world. They are practical ways of living into our identity as God's blessed children. They are what Glen H. Stassen calls “transforming initiatives.”

The American civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's owed much of its success to the disciplined practice of nonviolent resistance to the evils of segregation and discrimination. And the practice of nonviolent resistance owed much of its strength to the particular kind of Christianity practiced in black churches in the South, where Jesus' Sermon on the Mount “furnished the spirit and the motivation”⁴ for love of enemies.

Similarly in South Africa, the anti-apartheid movement of the latter decades of the twentieth century owed much of its success to the disciplined practice of nonviolent resistance. This was not so much a religious practice as it was a pragmatic and realistic strategy for dismantling the injustice of repression by a white minority government. Undergirding the practice of nonviolent resistance to this repression was the indigenous African concept of *ubuntu*, which is not faith-based, but is rather a kind

3 Stassen, 63.

4 Ibid., 16-17.

of humanistic philosophy, to use Western terminology. Here is how Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes *ubuntu*:

"My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. A person is a person through other persons. I am human because I belong. I participate, I share. I am available, open and affirming of others. A person with *Ubuntu* does not feel threatened that others are able, are good, they are self assured knowing that they belong in a greater whole." A person with Ubuntu suffers when others suffer and is humiliated when others are oppressed or treated unjustly.

Martin Luther King Jr. said it another way, "In a sense all of life is inter-related. All [of us] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be."⁵

All of life is inter-related. My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. All [of us] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. This is not only wisdom from Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King Jr. It is also wisdom from Jesus and the prophets. It is also the wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount, which is a practical guide to grace and deliverance.

5 <http://mbalicroazzo.blogspot.com/search?q=ubuntu>.