

“The Blessed”

I don't think the world has ever been as upside down in my or your lifetime as it has in 2020. A global pandemic and accompanying economic crisis, political division, protests for justice and a better world for all people. Every week seems to bring a new crisis for us to roll our eyes and think. *Now this!*

A year ago, life included parties, happy hours, and travel. It included regular activities such as workdays in the office, shopping for groceries, picking the kids up from school, and going to church without safety protocols. The world we now inhabit is strange, unfamiliar and scary. We don't know what the future will hold or how long this season of upheaval and uncertainty will last.

I have preached before, and I will preach again, that God did not bring this pandemic upon us to teach us a lesson. But maybe we are learning lessons from it. As written by Rev. Layton Williams in this week's issue of *Christian Century*, when looking at Matthew 5:1-12, the Beatitudes are a reminder that the world as we generally encountered it before the pandemic is not all the world that God intends or desires for us. Indeed, in many ways God's desired world is an inversion of the world we expect and feel comfortable with and entitled to---particularly those of us who benefit from advantage.

With these nine strange and unexpected blessings, Jesus of Nazareth begins his epic Sermon on the Mount, throughout which he offers instruction, parable, promise and command to his followers about the ways that God intends for us to live and the world God calls us to work towards.

In the main the Beatitudes use two verbs: *are and will*. Each begins in the present tense---“blessed are...” The present tense indicates that the Beatitudes are expressions of what is already true about the Christian community. They are what should be the marks of the Christian community. Of course, not every member of every congregation can claim to be meek, merciful and pure in heart, but the Beatitudes are addressed, not initially to individuals, but to the whole faith community. Among every authentic Christian congregation can be found persons of meekness, ministers of mercy, and workers for peace. Their presence and activity among us are a sign of God’s blessing and call to all of us to conform our common life more and more to these kingdom values.

The second verb, “for they will”-moves to the future tense. This move to the future tense indicates that the life of the kingdom must wait for ultimate validation until God finishes the new creation at the time of the final judgement and the second coming of Christ. Each of these blessings point to the eschatological future coming of the Kingdom of God. The future tense of the Beatitudes resists all

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notions that Christianity is a “philosophy of life” designed to make people successful and calm today, in the present moment. Christianity is not a scheme to reduce stress, lose weight, advance one’s career, or preserve one from illness. Christian faith, instead, is a way of living based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will finally prevail, and that God’s future will be a time of mercy and not cruelty. So, blessed are those who live the life now, even when such a life seems foolish, for they will, in the end, be vindicated by God.

Those who went before us knew that living the true Christian life would not necessarily be easy. As expressed by Jesus in the Beatitudes, they knew their reward would ultimately be in heaven, in the new kingdom. The reward may or may not be streets of gold and mansions, but they knew they would be blessed by God for eternity.

These nine pronouncements are not about general human virtues---they actually appear opposite to common wisdom. They pronounce blessing on authentic disciples in the Christian community. They do not describe nine different kinds of good people who get to go to heaven, but are nine declarations about the blessedness, contrary to appearances, of the eschatological community living in anticipation of God’s reign.

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Jesus begins by centering on those who suffer, those who remain faithful in the face of hardship, those who focus themselves on compassion and care for others, on justice and righteousness, on making true peace for a better world for all. Jesus reversed the general value system by pronouncing a blessing on the poor, the hungry, and those who weep. These are not the groups of people that our world tends to favor or exalt. In our dog-eat-dog world, the spoils go to the victor, the glory to the powerful. We celebrate those who are dominant, aggressive, and competitive. We like the Superman. We reward those who prioritize themselves. Meanwhile, our human nature is to avoid those who are suffering. Our worldly attitudes call us to reject calls for justice and peace, and we see self-emptying concerns for others as weakness.

Sadly, too, some Christians have the attitude that we do not need to do anything during our earthly lives. Let's just live the life of ease and let Jesus come back and set up his new kingdom then. But this is not what the Beatitudes teach. We in the Christian community need to work towards justice now. Why else would Jesus describe in the Sermon on the Mount what Christians will go through if they were to just live the life of ease? We are to go up against the powers and principalities of the world and work towards the kingdom of God on earth.

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As we examine Jesus' Beatitudes, how are we living in accord with them during the pandemic and the calls for racial justice? At Latimer, you have shown great concern for others. You have checked on each other. You have built each other up and affirmed each other. You have helped to make sure we can worship in certain ways. You have cooperated in safety protocols so we can worship as a community without putting others in danger. You have advertised food banks for those who have lost jobs and are in need of help.

I have seen stories of many in our country who have gone the extra step to help others. I recently saw a news clip about a group of doctors and nurses from Texas who went to New York for several months to help care for those in hospitals there. Some medical professionals, in order not to spread COVID-19 to their family members, have actually stopped living with their families as they treat patients affected with this virus.

Some, not those from Latimer, though, have engaged in selfish attitudes without concern for others. Some have emphasized individual rights and freedoms over concerns for the community. In the United States, we have individual freedoms and we need to respect them. In the Christian community, though, we live together in the community of discipleship, not by individualistic ethics. As we

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move forward, we need to consider that the Beatitudes expect us to be uncomfortable as we share others' burdens and see that righteousness is done.

In working for justice and needed reforms to make our nation and its people better, there are positive signs. Many have realized the need for changes and have worked in many ways to help their brothers and sisters, to push for legislation, and to put themselves out there. These have been Christians of all colors, races and creeds.

Will we do the hard work of making real and holy peace---instead of settling for the comfort of keeping a false peace that allows injustices in this world to continue? Some are still not convinced that changes need to be made. Some are scared of change. Some are still not willing to go against the status quo. Some are not willing to fight the powers and principalities that celebrate individual freedom and property rights over collective flourishing.

When we fight for justice, it might not be popular with our friends or family. It might go against what we have been taught from an early age. But Christianity is about transformation. It may be about enduring hardship now with the understanding that our reward is ultimately in God's kingdom.

In Matthew 5:7 Jesus talks about being merciful. Being merciful is when we are willing to help those whom we see as less than perfect, those we may view as

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sinner. Of course, we have all sinned. To exercise mercy, we don't insist on punishing people. We help all. Granted, in our culture today, mercy is more likely to be regarded as a sign of weakness than to be rewarded in kind. When you exercise mercy, people won't see you as tough enough.

But think of the example of Joseph. He was engaged to Mary. Then he finds out she is pregnant. He has the right to follow the law and break the engagement. This would have left Mary and her child without any support. But Joseph shows mercy. Yes, he was assured by an angel of the Lord that the child was the work of God. But he could still have been tough, gone by the law and not taken her as his wife. But he overcame his fears, took Mary as his wife and fulfilled God's plan.

You will not necessarily get praised for your mercy by some in our society today. Too many want retribution. Remember, the merciful will not usually receive their reward today but will receive mercy from God at the last judgment.

As Jesus closes out the Beatitudes, he preaches that you may well be insulted and harassed because of your work for justice. You are called to be full of joy and be glad because you will have a great reward in heaven. Keep in mind that the people harassed the prophets who have come before us when they spoke up for justice and mercy.

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In the Beatitudes, Jesus makes a promise that regardless of how this world fails them, God's commonwealth or kingdom will ultimately comfort and lift up those who are faithful and good. At the end, he speaks directly to his hearers, not only naming abstract groups but also reassuring those listening that if they also seek to be faithful and good, then no matter how the world mistreats them, God will ultimately be faithful to them.

As we close today, let us consider this observation from Rev. Layton Williams. Our world has been turned upside down, and that upending has meant immense suffering and struggle. But while we have been shaken up, while we are in this space of upheaval, perhaps we can see our reality from a different vantage point. Perhaps we might lean into the discomfort of asking ourselves why we were so comfortable with the world as it was before. Why was that world in so many ways the inverse of the world Jesus illustrates in the Beatitudes and was it ever right side up in God's eyes? If this is the end of that world, what new and better world might we allow to begin?