

SAINTS TOGETHER

Matthew 5:1-12

A Communion Meditation by Robert E. Dunham

All Saints' Sunday November 3, 2019

There has been a lot of talk about the Constitution in our land in recent months, with frequently-voiced concerns about a looming constitutional crisis. Many legal scholars and editorial writers seem to think we are in the midst of such a crisis, though they don't always agree on who bears the blame for the impasse. I read someone's comment that it feels like we are watching a bad train wreck, only this time we are on the train. The anxiety level is high, and it does feel as though the future of our republic somehow hangs in the balance.

One wonders: will we find our way back to the civil society we have long sought to be? Will we be able to reclaim our footing as a nation that, for all its stress on individual dreams and individual success, nonetheless has long valued the common good as a noble ideal? Will we be able to rediscover a politics where reason, respect, and truth hold the higher ground? Will we ever be unified enough again to reclaim the vision embodied in the preamble to the Constitution?

I learned that Preamble back in my ninth-grade civics class. It is not a perfect document, and I know we have not lived up to its ideals, but it is still remarkable. I imagine some of you could still say it with me:

We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

It seems to me that several of those preambular assumptions have been all but forgotten in today's America, where the common good is commonly ignored, or even disdained, and the "blessings of liberty" seem to be accorded to some, but not to all. That Preamble records our founders' vision for America and their hope for the kind of citizenry that would populate the land.¹ That vision seems to have lost its clarity in the current political landscape, and to be honest, I find myself a bit homesick for the country I had thought we were becoming.

I say all this as prelude to sharing an observation I came across this week while revisiting the Beatitudes we just read, namely one biblical scholar's assertion that the Sermon on the Mount is, in some powerful ways, Christianity's constitution and the Beatitudes are its preamble. He says, "The Beatitudes proclaim what is, in the light of the kingdom of heaven, unassailably true. They describe the *purpose* of every holy law,

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, 46.

the *foundation* of every custom, the *aim* of every practice of this new society, this colony of the kingdom, the church called and instructed by Jesus.”² In these fraught times, I can think of no more important text for the church to consider than the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes are our preamble... our mission statement, as it were. These nine sentences are not statements of conventional sociological wisdom, but rather radical assertions about the nature of human life within the providence of God. Jesus challenges his hearers to readjust their way of thinking about reality... about life... about God. He says things, in truth, are not what they seem. “It becomes quickly apparent,” says Tom Long, “that the Beatitudes turn the world’s values upside down.” If we were to take them seriously, they would turn our political landscape upside down, too.

What is true for those who live in the power of the kingdom of heaven is a flat reversal of what is considered to be true in the culture at large [says Barbara Brown Taylor]. The Beatitudes declare that the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers are the ones who are truly blessed. We live in a world, however, that pronounces [such] benediction over the self-sufficient, the assertive, and the power brokers. The people whom the world would see as pitiful – the mournful, the persecuted – are the very people Jesus claims are truly joyful.³

No one with a lick of sense was going to vote for any of [these] definitions of the Good Life, but Jesus did not ask for anyone’s approval. He just redefined the Good Life in nine short sentences and held them out for everyone to see: nine portraits of kingdom people, previously known as victims, dreamers, pushovers and fools. These are the chosen ones, he said, [the saints,] the blessed ones who will see God face-to-face. These are the happy ones... who shall be satisfied – not because they got an advance copy of the rules and played by them to win but because *winning* was the farthest thing from their mind.⁴

The subtle use of verb tenses in the Beatitudes is not unimportant. Each beatitude begins in the present tense: “Blessed *are*...” In other words, those who are blessed are joyful *now*, in the present. Six of the beatitudes, however, offer specific reasons for such blessedness that are not located in the present, but the future. Long says this indicates that “the church, the community of Christ, is a joyful people, but the source of their joy is not that they live easy lives in a happy world or that things are getting better every day, but that their trust is in God’s coming kingdom.”⁵

That is to say, the church always sees its life in two frames of reference. First, it sees what everyone else sees – a world and a nation of struggle and pain and injustice, where innocents suffer, where so-called leaders demonize people because of their race or their religion or their national origin or their sexuality or their gender. Based on what we see, there is not much reason for hope or joy. War follows upon war, violence begets

² Long, 46-47. Italics mine.

³ Long, 47.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, Cambridge, Cowley Publications, 1995, 146. Italics mine.

⁵ Long, 47.

more violence, and the poor and the innocent suffer every day. But the church, by standing on its head, also has a second frame of reference, for it sees what others do not see, that God is at work in this world even today and will surely bring the world to a time of joy and peace.⁶ Such confidence enables people of faith to live in the present, aware that they are blessed, despite everything that would assert the contrary.

Now, I want to be clear. This is not some “you’ll get-your-reward-later” sort of faith. Christian life, discipleship, and hope is very much rooted in the present as well as the ultimate future. Jesus is not inviting anyone in these beatitudes to become victims. He is not calling us to seek persecution for ourselves, or grief or even poverty of spirit, as though by doing so we could earn a place in God’s realm. Rather, he is offering assurance and strength to all who find themselves in a position of weakness, or poor in spirit, or mourning, or hungering for righteousness, that they know God’s heart. Perhaps the best way to understand Jesus’ words is as an imparting of grace. He is assuring those who are in pain or experiencing deprivation of spirit, or those who find it difficult to follow God’s commands, or those who are broken in any way, that God is right with them precisely where they are hurting or struggling.⁷

One theologian acknowledges that to those who live outside the church’s faith, the beatitudes may seem to be nothing more than the absurd delusions of sentimental minds. “But to those who have wept in the arms of a sister or brother, to those who have tasted compassion, to those who have committed themselves utterly to God, the beatitudes are the captions to life that reveal a wild, extravagant, unceasing love that breaks upon this world from the heart of heaven. In and through our hunger and our sorrow we know what the world cannot figure out: we are blessed.”⁸

Now, here’s the rub. If we believe the Beatitudes are indeed the Preamble to our Christian faith, then we may find ourselves thinking that we don’t measure up to their high expectations. And if we speak only individually, such worries certainly might have validity. New Testament scholar Eugene Boring concedes, “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 [...all forms of saints]. Their presence and activity among us are signs of God’s blessing *and* a call to all of us to conform our common life more and more to these kingdom values.⁹

In community, you see, our own faithfulness is multiplied. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul reminded the Christians there that they were “called to

⁶ Long, 47-8.

⁷ I am grateful for these insights to the late K.C. Ptomey and his sermon, “Foolish Blessings,” preached January 28, 1996 at the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Nashville, Tennessee.

⁸ Thomas Troeger, *Lectionary Homiletics* (VII, 2, January 1996), 30, as cited by Ptomey.

⁹ Eugene Boring, “Matthew,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VIII*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995, 180-181. Italics mine.

be saints, *together* with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ Called to be saints...not by themselves individually... but together.

On this All Saints’ Sunday, we are especially aware of such connections, not only with Christians in every *place*, but also with the faithful in every *time*: those who have sought and seek still to uphold the constitution of the church and to embody its preamble... the mourners, the peacemakers, the righteousness-seekers and the mercy-bearers... saints together. In this congregation our saints include the faithful who have gathered for worship on this site and its antecedents as far back as 1716 and as recently as this morning; our saints include those whose names we called when we saw them across this room this morning, those whose names we will tearfully speak during the Great Prayer, *and* those whose names are all but forgotten, except to God. Our saints are all those who live in God’s light, all who are willing to try to live by Christ’s constitutional promises, all who embrace a world turned upside down by the claims of this One, who is, after all, “the only one who really knows which way is up.”¹¹

That we have been called to such faithfulness *together* with all those saints is a great comfort... *and* a great challenge. If we will but claim our connection for this time and this place, their solidarity with us can be a source of considerable courage at a time when we may need it most. Indeed, together with Christ and together with the saints, we can still turn this world right-side up! We can, you know! And God knows, we surely should! We simply must.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:2.

¹¹ Taylor, 149.