

January 29, 2017
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

“You Lucky, Lucky People”
by Mary Anne Biggs

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 ~ Matthew 5:1-12

I've always loved to travel. I try to do so as a pilgrim and not as a tourist. I try to immerse myself in the culture, rather than supplant my American expectations upon another country. But I must admit that every so often I enjoy a good tourist trap or two. Maybe it's because we've never been able to afford the shops in the Saint Honore district in Paris ... and maybe I'm God's visual aid for the quote most often attributed to B T Barnum ... “there's a sucker born every minute” ... but every so often I find myself suspending belief and falling for the huckster. One scorching afternoon John, Mary Cate and I were in Athens. John couldn't get enough of the Acropolis, and Mary Cate couldn't get enough air conditioning. You know that old adage, “When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping,” so off I went with Mary Cate.

We found ourselves in a jewelry store, and were immediately confronted by a salesman who wore a glossy gray suit, silver hair slicked back, and pointed shoes so shiny that I left my sunglasses on. We knew we were in trouble the moment he greeted us: "You lahcky, lahcky people, you!" as if the greatest event of our lives ... the highest privilege and the deepest joy ... had just fallen into our laps because we entered his doors. And for the rest of the trip we kept teasing each other, "You lahcky, lahcky people, you!" whenever we entered some cheesy souvenir place to shop.

I'm not quite sure why, but I thought of him again as I read the Beatitudes this week. Jesus gathers a multitude on the hill side overlooking the Sea of Galilee. They have come from the towns and villages along the shore and up in the hills. It's a place to which these people can escape for a day ... from which they can rise above their lives so to speak ... get a bird's eye view ... a different perspective ... look down upon their place in the world from above ... see what God sees. It's a place to figure some things out. These are not the rich and powerful, who were few in number in those days and did not waste their time with traveling preachers or community picnics ... and who were not likely to worry much about the value of their lives. No, these are the common folk ... poor ... struggling to feed their families ... make a living ... get a life.

They are searching for something more than what they have, but they don't know what it is, let alone how to get it. And the first thing Jesus says to them is "You lahcky, lahcky people you!" "Blessed are the poor!" "Happy are those who mourn!" "How fortunate are those who hunger and thirst!" "God has smiled on the meek!" "And aren't you glad to be persecuted?" He's describing their lives.

Is he serious? Unless Jesus is just another cheesy sales weasel ... or one of those superficial "Don't worry; be happy" gurus hawking his self-help program as a marketing gimmick to sell t-shirts and bracelets ... something more must be happening here than just a "cheer up, look on the bright side" message. Jesus must mean there is a real blessedness in being down and out ... a genuine fulfillment in following an entirely different ethic from the whatever-it-takes-to-get-ahead-of-the-next-guy values of every human society since Cain and Abel. But just what is the blessing in these human conditions, behaviors, and motivations which seem so contrary to common sense?

I imagine these people looking at each other and thinking, "Am I missing something here? What's so great about being poor and hungry and meek and mournful?" After all, if they felt so blessed living on the bottom rung of society's ladder, they wouldn't have been looking for something more in life. They wouldn't have come out to hear Jesus in the first place!

They wouldn't have *needed* come out to hear Jesus in the first place. Maybe that's his point. Our neediness pushes us to search for God, and if you are looking, God isn't so hard to find, because God is always looking for you. Remember Jesus' picture of God as the shepherd searching for his one lost sheep ... or the woman searching for her one lost coin ... or the father standing at the gate, scanning the horizon for his one lost son? When everything is going fine, we are much less likely to rely upon God ... or search out the best ways to say thanks for all our blessings. The biggest danger of our prosperity and health ... even if they are just a seductive temporary mirage confirming the world's highest values ... is that they blind us to our deepest need ... our spiritual need ... our soul need for God.

To be sure, Matthew spiritualizes the beatitudes. In Luke, Jesus says "Blessed are you who are poor." In Matthew, he says "Blessed are the poor in spirit." In Luke, Jesus says "Blessed are you who are hungry." In Matthew, he says "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." In Luke, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who weep." In Matthew, he says "Blessed are you who mourn" ... a subtle but significant difference. It is possible that Jesus himself gave two different versions, but more likely that Matthew is interpreting Jesus' teaching to apply to the spiritual dynamics involved in difficult human circumstances. I suppose both are true because the physical and the spiritual are more closely linked than we imagine.

And scholars are divided about whether Jesus is being analytical or prescriptive in the Beatitudes. Does he mean we should try to be poor and hungry and mournful and meek so that we will be blessed ... or that we should recognize the hidden blessedness when we are already poor or hungry or mournful or meek? The Beatitudes themselves create this confusion because some are human conditions ... like poverty and hunger and grief ... while others are human behavior patterns ... like meekness or peacemaking. Perhaps he intends both.

Perhaps the messages in is the old palindrome: "Blessed are they that believe ... that they are blessed." (You know what a palindrome is ... it's a sentence whose words read the same backwards as forwards.) "Blessed are they that believe ... that they are blessed." If you approach life with the cynicism that disappointment is normal and that the worst that can happen usually does ... you will always see the worst in every situation. You will be miserable. But if you approach life with faith in the redemptive God ... who blesses and brings good even out of

the worst of situations ... you will discover unexpected gifts and surprising miracles along the way. You will be blessed.

On the other hand, these blessings seem to point to an entirely different worldview altogether. The Beatitudes render useless the whole familiar distinction between success and failure ... achievement and non-achievement ... which is such an important instrument in our normal analysis of life. What if God is not impressed with our success, let alone our righteousness? What if wealth and status and achievement and popularity and power and winning over the competition can't make you happy after all? What if those things are illusions ... and there isn't any real difference in the blessedness of the rich and the poor ... the strong and the weak ... the saint and the sinner ... the people at the top and the common *hoi polloi* because we are all equally beloved of God? Surely that is Paul's point in observing that "*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (God) is the source of your life in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 1:27-30).*

We look for God as we look for life, according to the ways that we know. So we look for God in quests for success ... in power over others ... in spectacular achievement. These are God's blessings aren't they? No, they are the way of the world and there is no life in them ... there is no God in them. God's way is the way of the cross. As Simon Tugwell puts it:

Christian maturity is not just a matter of pulling ourselves together and being very impressive characters who have got it all right ... who know exactly what it means to be a Christian ... and who have the will-power and the staying power actually to live up to it.... Our strength is the strength of God ... but the strength of God given to (humankind) ... and so revealed curiously in weakness.

This is a whole different way of being in the world ... a way which depends upon God's grace and goodness ... rather than our active self-aggrandizement or anxious attempts at self-righteousness, ... a way which recognizes the universal grace of life itself ... and sees everyone else as equally blessed and beloved of God ... a way at peace with God and others and self.

In this light, I really like Eugene Peterson's interpretation of the Beatitudes in *The Message*. This is how Peterson hears Jesus:

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and (God's) rule.

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

You're blessed when you're content with just who you are - no more, no less. That's the moment when you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. (God is) food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being "care-full," you find yourselves cared for.

You're blessed when you get your inside world - your mind and your heart - put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's (dominion).

Not only that - count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens - give a cheer, even! - for though they don't like it, I do. And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

You lahcky, lahcky people you! Well, you are! You are already beloved of God, and Christ is with you in every circumstance. So mine the spiritual wealth of who you are ... and where you are ... and what you are dealing with now, and don't postpone happiness to some distant and illusory achievement in the future. Most of all, be a Christ person in the world.

You see, in the final analysis, the Beatitudes aren't simply describing the common person ... or the sad souls who sought Jesus on that hillside long ago. They describe a quality of life which lives from the center of grace ... and knows itself in every circumstance to be blessed of God ... which responds to life out of this blessedness ... rather than reacting against circumstance ... which can therefore transcend even a cross.

May we pray?

Gentle Jesus, how we see you in these blessings you pronounce and promise. Surely you experienced the grace of God which flows to those who depend so radically upon God and do God's work and love God's people. And so you became the source for all such blessing as well. Show us where we are already blessed and how we can share those blessings with the people around us in a world still longing for the peace that passes understanding. Let us see the world as you see it from above and recognize the things that make for life that we also may know and offer God's peace. Amen.