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I Got a New Beatitude!

Today my wife and I are celebrating our seventeenth wedding anniversary.

You may notice we are not in the same room, this is how I know I am married to the same person I met and fell in love with in seminary more than twenty years ago. Katie has always been passionate about nurturing the spirituality of children and youth, which most often means we are not in the same building at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. Happy Anniversary honey.

You may remember that there is something called the lectionary which is universally utilized by most Christian pastors as the starting point for services and sermons each week. The lectionary is divided into a three-year cycle; years A, B and C each with a corresponding Gospel and supporting scripture passages.

Some passages occur in each of what are called the Synoptic Gospels and are therefore touched upon each year like; The beginning of Jesus' ministry, the feeding of the 5,000, entry into Jerusalem, crucifixion and resurrection.

The Beatitudes, however, appear only in Mathew and Luke and the authors' treatment of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount differs significantly.

Mathew's teaching is offered in five discreet lessons, while the passage we experience today from Luke offers a more casual tone, the teachings are less spelled out.

One of the reasons for Luke's less *in your face* approach is that he was writing to Gentiles (non- Jews), his goal was not conversion, but evangelism. Remember he was writing to people living 50- 60 years after Jesus lived. The Gospel message evolves as people evolve. That little fact may come in handy later.

My point is, I have been preaching from the Christian cannon for twenty years which means I have written at least a decade's worth of sermons on the Beatitudes. This go 'round I was interested in a fresh approach to address one of the most revered texts in the Bible. So, I went searching on the internet. A **lot** has been written and preached about the Beatitudes.

And you know when you go looking for one thing on the web how before you know it you have run down a rabbit hole of tangential topics?

I started following the words “Progressive Christian” and I ran into a column I thought said, “Five Ways to Tell if Your Church is ‘Progressive.’”

1. The Bible

Progressive Christianity emphasizes personal belief over biblical authority.

Comments you might hear in adult education or coffee hour

- *The Bible, while inspired by God was created by humans.*
- *In order to retain its worth, we might need to reject portions of it.*

2. Feelings are emphasized over facts

In Progressive churches, personal experiences, feelings, and opinions tend to be valued above all else.

Comments you might hear include:

- *That verse doesn't really resonate for me....*
- *I thought homosexuality was a sin, until I met and befriended some gay people- that changed my perspective.*

3. Essential Christian doctrines are open for re-interpretation

There are no sacred cows. Tradition, dogma, and doctrine- all are open to interpretation and revision.

4.

You might overhear people saying:

- *The resurrection of Jesus doesn't have to be factual to speak truth....*
- *The idea of a literal heaven and hell needs to be re-interpreted....*

4. Historic terms are re-defined

5. The heart of the gospel message shifts from sin and redemption to social justice and equity for God's creation.

I thought cool, there are some things I might have described a little differently, but essentially this author has captured it. I read on to the article's conclusion and realized I had missed a matter of significant importance.

This article was actually entitled, “Five danger signs to watch for in your church.” The take home message was that carried to its logical end, Progressive Christianity is an assault on the foundational framework of the Christian faith, leaving it disarmed of its power for salvation. The author warned that if any of these 5 danger signs are spotted in your place of worship, it might be time find a more “biblically faithful church community.” Oops!

This begs the question who defines what it means to follow Jesus?

The good news is and has always been, not one group of people. From its inception the disciples had differing ideologies. Some believed that Jesus’ message was only for the Jews, while others saw his life as proof that God’s realm belonged to everyone regardless of race, class, gender, or religious affiliation.

Turns out that for centuries, the very same words used to include people have also been used to exclude people. For me, the only way to read the Beatitudes is as a “radical anti-Empire manifesto for a new way of living- one that is aligned with the concerns of the poor, the meek, the peacemakers, the justice-seekers, and the persecuted.” (The Beatitude Society) Someone else might understand it very differently- although it is impossible for me to see how.

As I listened to the current administration declare a national emergency over a boarder wall this week. I wondered what Jesus might have to say? I listened to the lies and vitriol directed toward those immigrating to this country in search of safe harbor and puzzled how it is that the most Christian country in the world could allow its leadership to spew such hate.

I mean, no matter your interpretation, the words are right there; blessed are the poor, the desperate, the weeping and woe to those who ignore them.

Then again I guess the question has never really been how those in power will embrace or reject the message of justice and love, because they likely never will. The main reason being that empire is primarily invested in self-preservation and will naturally incline itself toward that which preserves its power even when, and sometimes especially at, the expense of the vulnerable.

The invitation may be then to consider not how others are failing to live out the instructions of Jesus, but if and whether we as followers of “the Way” are living them to the best of our ability.

I mentioned at the beginning of the message that the Gospel of Jesus evolves. It seems his holiness Pope Francis is in agreement on this point as he saw fit in 2016 to offer a revised rendition of the Beatitudes.

Addressing the crowd he said, “New situations require new energy;
— Blessed are those who remain faithful while enduring evils inflicted on them by others and forgive them from their heart.

— Blessed are those who look into the eyes of the abandoned and marginalized and show them their closeness.

— Blessed are those who see God in every person and strive to make others also discover God.

— Blessed are those who protect and care for our common home, (the earth and all its inhabitants).

— Blessed are those who renounce their own comfort in order to help others.

— Blessed are those who pray and work for full communion between (the followers of Jesus).

There is clearly much work to be done, may we have the courage needed to faces the challenges of our time.

Amen