

A Higher Way of Being

Matthew 5:1-12
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First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

Author and priest Richard Rohr has said, “Christianity is a lifestyle – a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared and loving. However,” he says, “we made it into an established ‘religion’ (and all that goes with that) and avoided the lifestyle change itself.”

He goes on to say, “One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish and vain in most of Christian history, and still believe that Jesus is one’s ‘personal Lord and Savior’ ... The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great.”¹

The world has no time, use for war, greed, racism, selfishness and vanity, and it never has. Going all the way back to the time of Jesus and beyond, the world has needed us to rise above such ways of being.

In our New Testament lesson, Jesus calls us to a higher way of being, the way of the Kingdom of God. Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount after seeing crowds of people being brought to him to be cured. Earlier, Matthew tells us, “They brought to him all the sick,” “those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics and paralytics.”

These are the people whom Jesus calls blessed, people who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted and reviled. Let’s look at these people and see why Jesus would call them blessed, and where our blessing is in the mist of it all.

The Kingdom of God, says Jesus, is reserved for those who are poor in spirit. What does that mean? Well, if we move the words around, we get a better picture of what Jesus means by poor in spirit. He’s actually talking about those who have the spirit of the poor, who connect with the poor.

These are people who do not let their good fortune become a barrier between themselves and those who are in need, those whose spirits have been laid low by life’s circumstances. And that is as true for those who have much as it is for those who have little. Both the wealthy and the poor can become too arrogant to care about others. It’s not a matter of your station in life, but rather your heart for those who suffer.

If you have room in your heart to show genuine concern for those less fortunate – if you can relate to the spirit of the poor – then you are indeed rich in spirit, rich in the Kingdom of God.

Let’s now look at those who mourn. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

¹ As shared by Rev. Dennis L. Stone, Terrace Lake United Methodist Church, Kansas City, Missouri, from Rohr’s “Yes, And...” collection of daily meditations.

“Those who mourn are not simply those who grieve a loss, but rather those who grieve the state of the world as it is, a world that has, in many ways, turned its back on the very one who gives and sustains life.

Boy, does this ring true these days – a world that’s turned its back on Jesus. Seeing a national decline in church attendance and fewer and fewer people knowing and following the Lord – that does cause us to mourn and grieve over the state of the world, doesn’t it? It is mourners such as this who see things most clearly. They see the rebellion of humanity and, yet, they also see the Kingdom of God breaking through, emerging even in the midst of such sadness. Faith like this leaves no doubt that the Kingdom of God will prevail. That is the comfort -and the hope- of those who mourn the world as it is -that God will prevail. And then there are the meek. The meek, says Jesus, will inherit the earth. What is it to be among the meek of this world?

Greek philosophers such as Aristotle shed light on this through their devotion to the Golden Mean or “the middle way.” The middle way means living between extremes. On the one extreme is wild and uncontrolled anger; on the other is a total lack of anger, a spineless resignation. In between is righteous anger or discontent, which is the middle way, the Golden Mean. Not accepting things as they are, while not getting pulled into extremism. The Greek word in the Bible that we translate as “meek” is the same Greek word that Aristotle used in describing the middle way, a life lived in perfect balance.

Next, Jesus talks about those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. For Matthew, this righteousness is more than personal piety or purity. It’s a quest for a kingdom in which all humanity is deemed righteous – the time when our sinful human condition has given way, and we finally see the Kingdom of God come fully into view. If we continue to hunger and thirst for such a state of universal righteousness, says Jesus, then we will be filled, it will be fulfilled.

Finally, Jesus talks about the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. The merciful are those who regard all others with empathy and compassion, thus gaining mercy, empathy and compassion for themselves. The pure in heart are those who embody a singleness of purpose, those whose vision of right and wrong is so clear that they see where God stands in all situations, they see God, as Jesus says.

And the peacemakers – those Jesus says will be called children of God – the peacemakers are those who refuse to divide the world into the binary categories of “us and them,” of “friend and foe.” Instead, they proclaim and embody the love and peace of God’s kingdom – of God’s very being – over and above all else. These are the children of God.

And finally, those persecuted for Jesus' sake are those willing to lay it all on the line for the sake of our Lord and Savior. Their joy is in living for Christ, and not just for themselves. They shall rejoice in all circumstances good and bad, knowing they live for Christ and Christ alone.

The bottom line is, those with compassion for others, those who find a middle way rather than going to extremes, those who want justice for all, who show empathy and mercy for others, those who see right and wrong with a pure heart and, yet, refuse to divide the world into "us vs. them" – these are the ones for whom this world was made, and the ones for whom there is a place in the world yet to come, the world that Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we are surprised, startled, amazed that you created us to be your people. We are surprised that you have not rejected your people despite our hard hearts and callous actions.

Thank you for loving us enough to challenge our false assumptions. Help us to see, once and for all, what it is you see: people cleansed and made holy by the love of Jesus Christ.

Gracious God, may we be blessed each day by your acts of love, your acts provision, and your acts of renewal.

We pray your healing love and spirit of renewal upon those who need you most, and especially all those we've been keeping in prayers these recent weeks.

We pray, Lord, for all who need your Spirit to guide them, comfort them, sustain them, and renew them. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, raising our eyes to heaven and our voices in song, praying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**