

Sunday Sermon
January 29, 2017
“Upside-down Gospel”
Matthew 5:1-12

Introduction

I heard about a minister who, wanting to teach about true blessings, asked the children one Sunday during the Time for Children what they would do if they were given a million dollars. “That is a lot of money,” she said. “What would you do with that much money?”

One little boy raised his hand. “I would give it to you, pastor,” the boy said. “To me?” the minister said, a bit surprised. “Why would you give the money to me?” “Because,” said the little boy, “my daddy said that you are the poorest preacher we have ever had.”

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

I

The late Dr. Scott Peck, an American psychiatrist and best-selling author, said that it was not unusual when he was meeting with a counselee for the individual to say, “Dr. Peck, I am so confused.”

And Peck would respond to the counselee, “That is wonderful.”

And the individual would say, “What do you mean? It is awful.”

And Peck would say, “No, no. It means that you are blessed.”

“What?” the counselee would ask. “It feels terrible. How can I be blessed?”

And Peck would answer, “You know, when Jesus gave his big sermon at the beginning of his ministry, the first words out of his mouth were, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit. There are a number of ways to translate the words he used for ‘poor in spirit,’ but one good translation is confused. Blessed are the confused.’”

“If you ask why Jesus might have said that,” Peck said, “then I must point out to you that confusion leads to a search for clarification and with that search comes a great deal of learning.”

“The people in the 15th century, for example, did not go to bed one night in 1492 thinking that the earth was flat only to wake the next morning knowing that it was round. They went through a whole period of confusion and exploration when they did not know which end was up.” (1)

My cell phone messed up this fall in the middle of the flooding in eastern North Carolina, where I was serving as pastor. The confusion after the flooding with people displaced, bridges out, and roads closed was not a good situation for learning new technology. The new phone seems to have a strong will about auto

correcting to what it thinks I am saying. It also happens that on the replacement phone the send button is located where the edit back arrow was located on the old phone.

In the middle of that confusion I was trying to discern if the time was right for me to leave where I was serving and transition into interim work here. I was confused, but I knew I needed to give an answer to your interim search committee. So late one night after discussing with my husband and praying about what to do, I dictated a text to Chris Bergelin on my new phone. What I meant to say was, “I think I can start in mid-January, worshipping with you on January 15, so that I can get a view from the pew before I step into the pulpit.”

I have such a drawl that I always need to edit voice texts. So I went to edit, only to realize that instead I had hit the send button. I read the text I sent to Chris. It said, “I think I can start mid-January, worshipping with you on January 15, so that I can get a view from the pier before I step into the p-o-o-p.”

Peck said, “In order to learn and to grow we have to go through periods of confusion. They can be uncomfortable; they can be painful; they can be embarrassing. But it is a blessed time. Because when we are there, despite our feeling poor in spirit, we are searching for new and better ways. We are open to the new; we are looking; we are growing.

“Virtually all of the evil in this world, Peck said, “is committed by people who are absolutely certain they know what they are doing, not by people who think of themselves as confused. “You see the confused realize they must depend upon the providence of God in order to survive.

And so it is that Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the confused.’” Blessed are the confused, for they are learning and growing. Blessed are the confused, for they know they must rely on God (2) . . . no matter what they step into.

II

The form of speech Jesus uses here in this sermon was a common one for that day—beatitudes, short, two-part affirmations about life. They usually consisted of practical wisdom, like saying today: “Blessed are they who have a retirement plan, for they shall be comfortable in old age” or “Blessed are they who floss daily, for they shall keep their teeth.”

So the form of what Jesus said was familiar to his hearers. But the content rocked the listeners back on their heels. Blessed are . . . you who are poor? . . . you who are hungry? . . . you who weep? Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of me . . . ? What is Jesus saying?

This is like picking up and drinking from a glass of what you think is apple juice only to find out it is vinegar. It is a shocking substitution of bad things for

good things.

Blessedness is equated with the very things we do our best to avoid—poverty, hunger, grief, hatred. Jesus makes the bad things sound good, and the good things sound bad.

III

Barbara Brown Taylor says Jesus should have had the people stand on their heads when he taught them the blessings in Matthew 5. Because that is what he was doing, asking them to turn their world upside down, to view the world from a totally different perspective, a different way of looking at it . . . upside down.

Upside down, you begin to see God's blessed ones in places it would never occur to you to look.

Upside down you begin to see that the poor in spirit, the meek, and those who mourn are not just people you can help, but people who can help you, if you will let them.

Upside down you see that their hunger and thirst for God are not voids to be filled, but appetites to be envied.

Upside down you begin to see that those who have been bruised for their faith are not the sad ones but the happy ones, because they have found something worth being bruised for.

And those who are merciful are just handing out what they have already received in abundance. (3)

Conclusion:

So say you were given a million dollars. Do you know psychologists say that would not make you any happier than you are right now? In fact, therapists report among individuals with newly-acquired wealth increased problems, increased divorce, family conflict, financial stress.

When we realize that even our best efforts can still leave us unhappy, hungry, empty, we come to Jesus, like the crowds, to get his touch, to get his blessing. And Jesus turns us on our heads and says,

You are already blest, because you have the kingdom of heaven.

You are already blest, because you can depend upon God for your everyday needs, including your daily bread.

You are already blest, because you know that it is God who is in control.

Upside down the world looks different. But that is how it is when you have your feet planted in the kingdom.

Jesus looked at it that way all the time. And he seemed to think we could too. (4)

Notes:

1. M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Travelled: The Unending Journey toward Spiritual Growth*. New York: Touchstone by Simon and Schuster, 1998.
2. Ibid.
3. Barbara Brown Taylor. *Gospel Medicine*. Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995.
4. Ibid.