

## Sermon: Blessed

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Jan. 29, 2023)

There is this timeless scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. In the scene, Jesus was standing on top of an elevated mount, surrounded by a massive crowd, all straining to hear what he had to say, in an apparent set-up to what biblical scholars would call the Sermon on the Mount. The scene in the movie zeros in on small group, standing far away, including Brian—sort of a patsy in the movie—who was destined to live a parallel yet inglorious life to that of Jesus of Nazareth. Brian and the group of people around him were straining their ears, trying to hear what Jesus was saying, while rebuking each other, telling each other to be quiet. “What was he saying?”, someone inquired. Someone else replied, “I think it was ‘blessed are the cheesemakers.’” Another chimed in, “Cheesemakers!? What so special about cheesemakers?” Yet another, who seemed wise, at least wiser than the rest of this bunch spoke, “Well, obviously it is not meant to be taken literally, as it refers to any manufacturer of dairy product.” Blesses are the cheesemakers!

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we are reflecting today on the Beatitudes, the opening blessings of the Sermon on the Mount, preached by Jesus of Nazareth, in how the Gospel of Matthew has arranged, as the opening teaching of his earthy ministry. Just so we are clear: Blessed are the peacemakers! Not cheesemakers as in the movie. Monty Python, I am referring to the British comedy troupe in the 70's, has this ingenious ability to be simultaneously hilarious, irreverent, and deeply thought-provoking. That scene in the *Life of Brian* I spoke of earlier, provokes us to ask some critical questions: How was the Beatitudes received by its original hearers? What was its impact on a crowd of 1st century Judaeans, on a people weighted down by teaching of their own religious authority, on a population oppressed by the heavy handedness of a foreign occupier?

To answer such questions, we have to be aware that Matthew, the author of the Gospel, had arranged the giving of the Beatitudes in a very particular way. In Matthew 5:1-2, “*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him, and he began to speak and taught them.*” Just like Moses who went up to Mount Sinai, Jesus went up an unnamed mountain. Just like Moses who came down from the mountain and gave the Ten Commandments to the

Israelites, Jesus also came down a mountain, sat down, and taught the Beatitudes to the people. If the Ten Commandments is the centre piece of what would eventually become the Law, the Torah, encompassing 613 rules, instructions, and regulations, then the Beatitudes, with its eight blessings could be rightly understood as representative of the earthly teaching of Jesus. Following the Beatitudes, at least according to Matthew's arrangement, is the Sermon on the Mount, a series of more detailed re-interpretation of the Law. Augustine, the early Church Father, had noted long ago these teachings of Jesus could be roughly broken down into eight parts, each mirroring and echoing the blessings of the Beatitudes.

Before we dive deeper into the Beatitudes, we should be reminded that following the giving of the Law, a dominant theology emerged that lasted throughout pretty much the entire Old Testament period, of what scholars call it the Deuteronomic Theology. You are aware of it, even if you may not be familiar with its name, that is: if one faithfully obeys the Law, one will be blessed by God; but should one disobey and stray from the Law, then curses from God will surely follow. In fact, Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 carefully listed all the blessings and curses that one could face. Should you open the bible to those chapters, you would surely notice that there are a lot more curses than blessings—life under the Law is hard. Furthermore, the cultic section of the Law presupposes that no one could rightly obey the Law in its entirety, therefore a sacrificial system was developed so people could make right with God, thereby not suffering from the stipulated curses when one inevitably breaks the Law—like I said, not an easy life at all.

Again, before we dive into the Beatitudes according to Matthew, we should also be aware that the Gospel of Luke had recorded also a mini-beatitudes. But according to Luke, Jesus taught those not at the beginning of his ministry, but somewhere in the middle. Also Jesus wasn't coming down from a mountain, but was actually on a plain, a levelled ground. The Lukan version recorded only the first four blessings. It is then followed by four corresponding woes, not unlike the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. With that being said, according to Matthew, this is what Jesus proclaimed to his disciples and the crowd,

**Blessed** are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**Blessed** are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

**Blessed** are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

**Blessed** are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

**Blessed** are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

**Blessed** are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

**Blessed** are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

**Blessed** are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Who are the poor in spirit? The Lukan version has Jesus pronouncing blessings on the poor, those who find themselves living impoverished lives. As the matter of fact, Luke seems to portray Jesus as having a preferential care for the poor. But, here in Matthew, it is the poor in spirit who find themselves blessed. This spiritualized poor encompasses a much wider group, of people who are not just materially poor, but impoverished in many other ways. The next three blessings go on to elaborate on the poor in spirit, to include those who mourn, those who are meek, and those who hunger and thirst, not just for food but for justice and righteousness. These four blessings speak not of the Law, not of doing something, but of a state of being that is humble and weak. What is going on here? Was Jesus confused? Has he got it wrong, got it all up-side-down? The next three blessings to the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers seem more palatable to our ears, as these are worthy goals to emulate, to strive for. But the last blessing, to those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Once again, it is inverted, it is up-side-down. I mean, who wants to be poor, meek, or mourn? Who wants to hunger or thirst, even for righteousness? Who really wants to experience persecution, in any form?

I love this painting by Henrik Olrik, titled Sermon on the Mount, as printed in this week's bulletin cover. I love the vivid portrayal of the facial expressions of those who hear these words of Jesus for the first time. Some are pensive, scratching their heads, seemingly chewing on these words of Jesus in their mind. Some are wide-eye, in a state of shock...did I just hear that? One at the back seems to be recoiling, attempting perhaps to get away from there as fast as possible. Yet, more are straining to hear more, to move closer, to grab on to the blessings imparted by those words. Have we perhaps—after hearing, reading and studying about the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount so many times—have we lost

that sense of shock, as those who hear it for the first time? Have we lost the appreciation of how inverted, how counter-cultural, how subversive these words were, and still are?

For the past week, as part of preparation for this sermon, I came across a book titled “The Beatitudes Through the Ages”, by Rebekah Eklund. The book masterfully weaves together the ‘reception history’ of the Beatitudes, that is how various communities of the past received, interpreted and applied these eight blessings, and how they continue to impact our world today. I am still reading and chewing on her book, still finding surprises and insights, and won’t really do justice to her work today. Perhaps one day, I will make a sermon series on these eight blessings of Jesus. I’ll cite one example the author looked into closely, of the Ghent Altarpiece, a masterpiece painted by Hubert and Jan van Eyck in the 15th-century, where it depicts “the merciful” as, of all things, crusading knights. The mercy credited to them is their forceful conversion of the heathen. It is a reminder to us of how we often naively misinterpret the words of God, to suit our own purpose.

Layton E. Williams wrote these words recently, in the Christian Century magazine, the Beatitudes of Jesus is for “those who suffer, those who remain faithful in the face of hardship, those who focus themselves on compassion and care for others, on justice and righteousness, on making true peace for a better world for all.” In a world, whether ancient or modern, that celebrate those who are dominant, aggressive and competitive. In a world that rewards those who prioritize themselves, that sees self-emptying concern for others as weakness. Jesus blesses us with the promise of Beatitudes. When we find ourselves on the short end of the stick, when we are unable to save ourselves from misery and suffering, when we grieve at inhumanity and injustice all around us, God is there to comfort and lift up those who are truly faithful and good.

At the end, Jesus addresses us directly, as his disciples, and I will leave these words with you,

**“Blessed** are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**