

November 5, 2017 at Advent Lutheran Church in Cedarburg, Wisconsin. All Saints Sunday. Matthew 5:1-12. The Beatitudes and what they mean.

QUESTION: Have you ever wondered what might be the deeper meaning behind what are called "the beatitudes." One mistake I think that we sometimes make, perhaps the most common one is to romanticize the conditions that are expressed here.

Being poor in spirit hardly seems like a good thing, and certainly being reviled and persecuted is not something any of us would seek or want.

So, the meaning of these blessings must be someplace else, as indeed I believe it is.

One of the definitions of the adjective blessed is to make holy, consecrated, held in reverence, respected.

That is important given that the people who are listed in the beatitudes were exactly those who were persecuted and excluded from the religious community and society in general.

Once again, I would remind us that it is almost impossible to appreciate the radical nature and power of what Jesus was talking about if we do not consider the context in which it took place. The Jewish faith and religion was structured in such a way that the lives of the people were strictly controlled by the Levitical code and the priests of the temple.

There was no alternative religious choice for people who perhaps had different beliefs from the temple practices. You were either in, or out. All people who obeyed and lived by the temple rules and structures were in. But only if they were born without physical or mental abnormality.

Any physical or mental shortcoming, by religious definition was reason to not include you in the faith family. One of the reasons we read about how people were clustered by the city gates, and Jesus healed them as he encountered them was because they were not allowed to enter the city.

Children were viewed as possessions, and had very few rights and could be killed by parents for misbehaving. Women were of lower value than men and considered to be the property of men, and men could have as many wives as they

could afford, and if they no longer wanted them, they simply wrote what was called a “writ of divorce,” and sent them on their way.

Besides young children, the most vulnerable people were widows. If a widow had no family to take care of her she became homeless and had to survive by begging for food. Already in the Old Testament the prophets who are referenced and compared to the blessed ones condemned the people for their cruelty in treating widows in such a heartless way.

The poor in spirit could be anyone who is considered somehow less than normal and hence unacceptable. Someone physically or mentally challenged. Ironically, when most churches of the vintage that Advent is were built it was with complete disregard for how anyone who is not physically fit would even be able to get into the building.

We are talking about that here at Advent right now since an increasing number of people are using our now aging lift to be able to get to the sanctuary. And it has just been in my lifetime that those little ramps were introduced where sidewalks end at the corner of the street enabling wheelchairs, walkers and electric scooters to negotiate the curb.

Again, in my lifetime people born with down syndrome or any other restrictive anomaly that had nothing to do with their humanity as children of God were simply warehoused in places like Southern Colony in Union Grove. Now, thankfully we find them employed in meaningful ways in many places in our society.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Those who lose loved ones and grieve need to be embraced and loved, and encouraged. This is what a faith community is for. It was not happening for too many people in Jesus’ day.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Let’s not confuse meek with weak. The **meek** are those who are **gentle, humble, and unassuming**, simple but determined in faith and **patient** in the face of every affront. That’s not weakness, that’s true strength.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. To be righteous, is to be morally, ethically truthful. To seek that which is right, **good, honest and proper**. That is the way you behave in a faith community.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. To show mercy is to **forgive**. But it is so much more than that. To be merciful is to treat others with **compassion, kindness, forgiveness**. And it is what **Schindler** told **Amon** the camp commandant in the movie, *Schindler's List*.

Oskar Schindler: **Power is when we have every justification to kill, and we don't.**

Amon Goeth: **You think that's power?**

Oskar Schindler: **That's what the Emperor said. A man steals something, he's brought in before the Emperor, he throws himself down on the ground. He begs for his life, he knows he's going to die. And the Emperor... pardons him. This worthless man, he lets him go.**

Amon Goeth: **I think you are drunk.**

Oskar Schindler: **That's power, Amon. That is power.**

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. I believe the pure in heart are those who have no agenda. They have nothing to prove. They are pure in heart because life's inconsistencies and unfairness have not spoiled their excitement and wonder. Children are like that. They live in the moment, and find everything fascinating. That's why Jesus says we should be like children.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Those of us who have lived long enough to experience war either directly or indirectly understand that war, though sometimes inevitable, is **never good**. Members of the faith family first and foremost seek the ways of peace, even while being willing to serve and protect.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. If you are persecuted for doing what is right, honest and true – in a word, "**righteous**," you are already creating **heaven on earth**. It's the only way heaven is created, and not through some sacred magic act by an invisible power. That is superstition, not faith.

The Beatitudes end with a reminder that if you are attacked for doing what is right you are in good company. **Rejoice and be glad** for the prophets of God were treated the same way, for the same reason. Those who do evil do not like to be

exposed and reminded of that. But **speaking truth to power** is the only thing that will ever make it stop.

So, as I understand them, the **Beatitudes** are not simply words of encouragement to make the **disenfranchised, excluded, powerless, voiceless victims** feel better about themselves, but rather to embolden, encourage and empower them to do what is possible with God's help.

This is a rallying cry and a reminder that ordinary people like you and me can do extraordinary things if we believe and follow the teachings of Jesus with trust and persistence.