

Not self-evident but still true
Reading from the Old Testament: Micah 6:6-8
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 5:1-12

I like color and would struggle with Manhattan's monochromatic fashion sensibility. After all, black highlights lint, and who wants to walk around looking like they work in a fuzz factory. I like color and can generally can dress myself without risk of reproach for color infractions. I don't typically walk out of the closet to the tune of *One of these things is not like the other...* And yet, I do confess that without proper lighting I sometimes find it challenging to distinguish between navy and black, indigo and ebony. At times require assistance – *Donna is this navy or black?* Without the proper light, and sometimes even with it, the truth of navy or black is not self-evident. When is red no longer red, but pink ... or orange?

Possibly, you, too, have felt deflated upon opening the box of that perfect item you ordered online only to realize it looks far afield from the color highlighted in the catalogue. You ordered red. You got fuchsia. Seriously, I just got a pair of running shoes that were clearly marked red online, but when I open the box and held them up to my eye, it looked suspiciously like there was some hot pink in there. Hence the repeated

greeting I'll hear for the next few months: *Well, they will certainly see you coming!* Yes. Yes, they will.

Is it red or is it not? Is it black, because I see hints of purple? Is it grey or is it greige? The truth is not always self-evident.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident...” Equality, Inalienable rights, life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. *Well, duh! Obviously!* I'm all for it. Hard to find someone who isn't. That's not the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Count me in, even though we've often done a poor job of living up to those truths, or actively pursued what those truths require. They are still true and worthy of declaration and aspiration. Self-evident.

However, sometimes there are truths that may not be self-evident, but remain no less true. Enter the Beatitudes. The word beatitude comes from the Latin word for blessing, and as a heading it highlights the opening section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. The Beatitudes are a list of declarative statements about the experience of blessing in the economy of God's kingdom, a kingdom that is coming, and already present in the person, word, work, and lordship of Jesus Christ.

The Beatitudes are not a guidebook on the steps to successful living, or practical advice for folks composing a life plan. The Beatitudes are not statements about general human virtues or a listing of nine types of good people who get to go to heaven. The Beatitudes are not the job description for an individual pursuing ethical habits. In fact, the only imperative in the whole list comes at the end, and it is a call to rejoice. (*Cf. People's NT Commentary*)

So, what then are the Beatitudes? Well, they are popular, often the subject of a cross-stitch, a bumper sticker, or a sermon series. They, along with Psalm 23 and I Corinthians 13, are frequently requested as a reading for a wedding or a funeral. Their recitation often evokes feelings of warmth and goodness, along with a sense of God's nearness. Yet, as is true of oft-quoted prose, poetry, and scripture, we tend to listen to it superficially without drilling down into meaning and purpose.

However, the declarations made in the Beatitudes, those words Aunt June lovingly stitches into her needlework, though they might be popular, superficially familiar, would not be called self-evident. Indeed, it may be more accurate to say the Beatitudes are counter-intuitive, even counter-cultural. Blessed are the poor? Blessed are the meek? Blessed are those who

mourn? Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake? Not exactly the makings for a trendy, attractive membership campaign. *The excitement is building. Next week is Persecution Sunday! Be sure to register. Invite a friend.*

Who made this list? And what is it that makes the Beatitudes true, because they are certainly not self-evident? A casual observer to our culture would likely develop a very different list. Blessed are the victors; to them belong the spoils. Blessed are the powerful, for they make the rules and game the system to keep the power. Blessed are the arrogant, the take-no-prisoner aggressors, who thrive by intimidation. Blessed are the affluent who get all the toys. Blessed are the beautiful who thrill in their adulation. Blessed are the self-promoters, the influencers who thrive on likes. Blessed are the loud, the caustic, the provocative who get the airtime, the ratings, the press, and the big contracts. The stock market has an impressive record of making bets that these are the beatitudes we treat as self-evident truths.

But ... blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the reviled? That's a harder sell. Who made this list, and to what evidence could we point that makes them true?

The source is what makes them true, and his own life witness is their authentication. The truth claims made in the Beatitudes are not independently true. They are true because Jesus said so. The Beatitudes “are not observations that others of lesser insight had simply overlooked, such as the truths of mathematics or logic.” (cf. People’s NT Commentary) Their truth is revealed in the person of Christ. The disciples and witnesses who saw Jesus in action and heard him speak would say, “He taught as one with authority and not as one of their scribes.”

Think of the influences that have marked your journey, the times you committed to something, ascribed to a movement or idea, not because of acquired knowledge, but simply because of who spoke or approached you. How many times have you confessed, *I don’t fully understand what you are saying or asking, but I believe you, I’m with you. Whither thou goest, I will go.*

Jesus, Son of God, the Lord who is, who was, and who is to come, the Word made flesh is not offering a list of common sense observations, or even a compilation of commands, but is declaring the blessedness of the community who orients their shared life to the coming, and already dawning, kingdom of God. Their common life is infused with anticipation of

the fulfillment of God's intentions for God's good creation. As John will later envision, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.'"

Sensing this, experiencing this in the person of Jesus changes things. It changes how we experience this world today. It changes how we understand our role in our neighbors' lives. It changes how we interpret our experiences, what we take from them.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom community is one where no one is neglected or forgotten, a community where humility fosters a shared understanding of dependence upon God's grace.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Those grieved by loss, those who mourn the present conditions of suffering in the

world, are comforted by the community, a healing presence through whom and with whom our mourning turns to dancing.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” who understand the ultimate goal is not victory but reconciliation – swords into plowshares, life-taking transformed into life giving. We can trust that blessing, that truth because it is Jesus who said it, it is Jesus who embodied it, it is Jesus’ resurrection that confirms it, and it is Jesus who equips the church for it.

An interesting corollary to such truths as the Beatitudes is the way their proclamation, and the fact it is Jesus who proclaims them, begin to effect the very changes they envision. When we read these declarations and understand that it is Jesus who said them, we cannot un-see them, we cannot un-hear them.

Periodically, our property committee will take a walk around our campus, purposefully looking closely at the facility to note items that require attention – an emerging crack here, signs of a leak there, a need for a coat of paint or the repair of a failing gutter elsewhere – all signs they probably wouldn’t have noticed without paying intentional and close attention. Once noticed, they can’t un-notice them. In fact, they loom larger

every time you pass them, triggering that urge (or that guilt) to do something about them.

To be blunt, once you notice the pimple, or worse, someone else points it out, from that point forward you feel like your wearing Mt. Vesuvius. Once you notice the grease stain on the strategically, embarrassingly location on your pants, you're obsessed with doing something about it. You cannot un-see it. You cannot ignore it. You are driven to participate in correcting it, and you are grateful as you see progress.

In Luke's more existential and tangible listing of the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled ... Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Hearing that truth and being confronted by that condition draws you into the effort to feed the hungry, to turn someone's mourning into dancing, to bring peace where there is festering conflict. That is the way the community of faith lives in anticipation of God's reign, participating in the work of reconciliation that is God's ultimate intention, rejoicing in the signs that point to the fulfillment of the Beatitudes.

We have a cherished member of our family who is a gifted young teacher working in a very difficult setting in Washington DC. Liza teaches 4th grade and at the beginning of the school year, the vast majority of her students were reading on a kindergarten level, which is to say they weren't reading at all. In addition, within her school's neighborhood is a hotel that was turned into an emergency housing shelter for migrant children unceremoniously bussed in from Florida and Texas, children who had already been through the trauma of escaping violence, hiking across multiple countries, homeless, without resources, egregiously profiled, and viewed with contempt.

They were just little kids, with no agenda other than survival and hanging on to some shred of hope. Imagine being suddenly dropped off at school for the first time. You don't know where you are. You don't have a single clue of how to navigate this setting. You don't know a word of the language. And suddenly, you're in a classroom with a whole other group of kids grappling with a bunch of obstacles to learning that are different but no less daunting: abuse or addiction in the home; literal hunger; learning disabilities; chaotic lives.

And then, imagine the teacher. Budget constraints, institutional sclerosis, intransigent behavioral issues, limited support. Blessed are the poor in spirit? I think not. Heavy are the tears, more likely. Utterly exhausting is the day, constantly diffusing pint-sized firecrackers of unstable emotions, trying to restore some fraction of what was lost to the pandemic, fending off regular visits from the demon named despair.

But then, just as questions of purpose and will creep in, there is movement. A small light shines in the darkness, a wall is broken through. We talked to her this week, and her joy was infectious and irrepressible. One of her students had cracked the code, had taken a leap forward in learning, and many others had shown concrete signs of significant growth. And her principal told her she had literal tears of gratitude in her eyes as she observed Liza working with her students. And when talking with Liza about that little boy (his name is Martin) it was as if she had won the lottery. No, that's not fair, the lottery could never compete with that kind of joy. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Amen.