



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

BEATITUDES...UPSIDE DOWN?
JANUARY 29, 2023

A Homily by the Rev. Jo P. Popham

Matthew 5:1-12

The nominees for Academy Awards were announced this week. *Top Gun: Maverick* received five Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Writing, Original Song, Best Sound, and Best Visual Effects. We have seen only two of the nominated shows, but *Top Gun: Maverick* has my vote for its realistic adaptation of the 1986 original, taking test pilots into this century. The movie *The Right Stuff* that came out in 1983 was an historical drama that followed test pilots 75 years ago. It bombed financially, but was nominated for eight Oscars and won four. Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier – flying the X-1 at supersonic speed. A copy of *The Right Stuff* resides in the Library of Congress, as “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”¹ Chuck Yeager has disputed some of the details, and he would know, because he was in the cockpit. The movie depicted the test pilots’ planes disintegrating or crashing after severe vibrations when they reached the sound barrier; their controls stopped working, appearing to work backwards. So one test pilot reversed his controls when he reached the magical number of 735 miles per hour. And it worked.

One of our favorite theologians N.T. Wright has used *The Right Stuff* the movie to illustrate what Jesus was doing in his teaching using the simple words of the Beatitudes in the Gospel according to Matthew.² In my sanctified imagination, I see Jesus sitting down on the hillside with his own disciples gathered around him and more than 5000 people (not counting the women and children) who had followed him.³ He took a breath, smiled what must have been a contagious smile full of the love of God, and he took the controls and made them work backwards.

Lest we think that Jesus used simple teachings, think again. Today we heard the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, which goes on for many chapters where Jesus taught using the best language devices that this preacher can only imagine using. First of

all, consider that blessing can mean “wonderful news.” Jesus had wonderful news for his listeners then and now! He was not trying to give them or us chicken soup for our souls, he was not telling them how to live to be rewarded one day in heaven. He was not so much giving advice as he was giving them good news, wonderful news.

What would be wonderful news for us? Success? Wealth? Long Life? Victory in battle? More people in the pews? More food in the church pantry? Are those evidence of receiving the wonderful news of the Gospel? Or is the wonderful news meant for only the humble? The poor? Those who mourn? The peacemakers? Those who need shelter from the weather? Those who have no kitchen to prepare a meal or even a camp stove?

Jesus was turning the world upside down, as he so often did. And to Jesus the Beatitudes were not simple statements but exclamations. Oh, the blessedness of the poor in spirit! They were not mere hopes of what will be in the distant future but sincere expressions of what already is.⁴

The Greek understanding of blessedness is much more than happiness, since happiness is “dependent on the chances and the changes of life, something which life may give and which life may also destroy.”⁵ But nothing in life or in death can take away Christian blessedness says William Barclay, another of our favorite Biblical scholars. If we walk with Jesus our joy is untouchable. But let’s talk about the particulars of these countercultural upside/down Beatitudes.

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

The Beatitudes were not originally in the Greek language. They were spoken by Jesus in Aramaic, a dialect of Hebrew. And poor in its original had a four stages: simply being poor, and then being without influence, power, or help, or prestige, then being oppressed and down-trodden, and finally having no earthly resources and therefore being totally dependent on God. The poor then put their whole trust in God alone. And blessed is the one who is helpless and trusts God entirely. To the poor in spirit, things are meaningless and God is everything. Do not misunderstand this beatitude to mean that it is a blessing to be poor, destitute, that poverty is a good thing. However, poverty of spirit that leads someone to helplessness so as to rely on God for help is indeed a good thing. And the

poor in spirit do possess the Kingdom of God because they have learned to trust and obey God.

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

The Greek word used here is the strongest meaning for those who mourn the dead, for the death of one that was much loved accompanied by heart ache and tears. Yet sorrow can reveal the kindnesses of our fellows, our families, our friends. In the hour of our greatest sorrow God's love is there in the love of our fellows. And if we accept that love, we can find new strength and beauty that comes from God through others. And the flip side of this beatitude is the blessedness of those who intensely care for the sufferings and sorrow and needs of others. Out of those sufferings and sorrows we can find the joy of God.

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

In our modern understanding of meekness we might think that this beatitude refers to "spinelessness, and subservience, and even mean-spiritedness. A meek person makes us think of being submissive and ineffective.⁶ In Greek, however, meekness means a balance of anger at the right time and right place. Another Greek meaning of meekness is about self-control, but God controlled rather than human control. Perfect freedom then comes from being meek doing God's will. And yet another 1st century meaning of meekness is humility that sets aside pride entirely. Thus blessed is the one whose humility allows for that person to know their own ignorance and weakness and need for God.

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

Simply put, how blessed are the ones who seek true righteousness as much as one who is starving and one who is dying from lack of water.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

The New Testament teaching is that only the merciful will receive mercy, but this beatitude is deeper than that. To go back to the Aramaic and Hebrew word – chesed – is difficult at best, for it is untranslatable. Chesed is more than feeling sorry for a person or to sympathize with a person's troubles. It is more than pity. It is more like seeing as the suffering person sees and feeling what they feel by getting inside their head and heart.

And then if we had true chesed we would do for that person what God and Jesus would do and for that we would be blessed.

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

The one whose motives are entirely unadulterated, entirely unmixed, absolutely pure is blessed and will one day see God.

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

In Hebrew this beatitude is about shalom, meaning not only the absence of trouble but for what makes for the highest good. The absence of evil and the presence of all good things. But not just for that individual. Blessed are those who make this world a better place for all to live in. Godlike work then is the blessedness of creating right relationships between all people.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

How many over the last two millennia have suffered for being Christian? Too many to count. We may not be persecuted as they were, but being loyal to our Christian faith has its consequences even today. Loyalty to our faith can lead to being insulted and mocked. Practicing Christian forgiveness and love can lead to being criticized and condemned, and even hated for our openhearted stance in caring for our neighbor as Jesus taught and teaches still.

Can we accept that the Beatitudes are not so much promises to Christians for the future, perhaps even promises for life after death (that I like to call life after this life)? We must, because it is up to us to bring about these promises in the here and now. Jesus came to bring about God's promised future. Jesus is with us now empowering us to continue his work to fulfill those promises on. Now we have the controls in our hands - even though the blessings we have received appear to be backwards, upside down. If we are blessed - and we are - then we must live into making the Beatitudes be right side up.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ “Library of Congress announces 2013 National Film Registry selections” (Press Release). Archived 2016-06-10 at the Wayback Machine *Washington Post*, December 18, 2013. Retrieved: December 18, 2013.

² N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part I*. Louisville Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, pp. 34-38.

³ He would later feed with not just the Word of God but with bread and fish. (See Matthew 14:13-21.)

⁴ William Barclay on Matthew 5, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/matthew-5.html>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*