



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

“Being a God star”
Epiphany 6C – 2.16.25
Luke 6: 17-26

A Homily by The Rev. Jo Popham

Jesus often turned conventional wisdom on its head. By opening his Sermon on the Plain with the “blessed are” ... and “woe” statements, Jesus deliberately inverted the standard values of the time. He spoke in this way to shock his audience out of their complacency. But have the beatitudes lost their power, have they lost their shock value, to this 21st century generation because we are so familiar with the text? Indeed popular culture has used Jesus’s teaching so often that sometimes we don’t even think of these words as Biblical.

- In the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *Godspell* the disciples run at Jesus with the first part of the verse “Blessed are the poor” and Jesus finishes with “for their’s is the Kingdom of Heaven.”
- Sting sings “Blessed are the poor; for they shall inherit the earth. Better to be poor than be a fat man in the eye of a needle.” So much for context...”
- Jazz Saxophone player Paul Winter has a song entitled “Beatitudes.
- The famous film critic James Agee quotes the Beatitudes in one of his award-winning books turned into a documentary.
- The Beat Generation of the 1950’s (the forerunners of the 60’s counter cultural movement) was really named after the Beatitudes.
- The Simon & Garfunkel song “Blessed” appears on their *Sounds of Silence* album – “blessed are the meek – blessed is the lamb whose blood flows, blessed are the sat upon, spat upon.... O, Lord, why have you forsaken me?”

For those who believe the beatitudes have lost their power to touch our hearts, think again! Jesus continues to shock us out of our complacency. Were we on that plain listening to Jesus speak the Beatitudes or were we the first readers of Luke’s Gospel in the later half of the 1st century, we would be just as touched. With our global world view, we 21st century folk are perhaps more aware of the needy that Jesus spoke of 2000 years ago. And we have organized efforts to reach out to some of those that Jesus told us to

help: widows and widowers, the homeless, the hungry, the marginalized, the unemployed, those whose jobs have been eliminated, evacuees, and refugees.

And as a former refugee myself, I can tell you that the human response is what heals. A good friend and hymn writer found us just a few days after floods waters following Katrina took our home and ministries in Louisiana. We were homeless for 22 months; our car was our home; we were refugees; we were rejected by the church we love; we had to leave the country to find employment. Within days after the flooding our dear friend had written for a hymn for us that he shared with the Episcopal Relief & Development & ELCA Disaster Response:

Refugee people,
hungry and crying,
dazed and some dying,
ripped from their homes,
taken from comfort,
callings and family,
praying for future,
very alone.

Refugee people,
limping toward safety,
running on empty,
home is so far.
Please, God, go with them.
Guide and protect them.
Give them direction.
Send them a star.

Joseph and Mary:
refugee people,
traveled together
to Bethlehem.
Joseph was weary,
Mary expecting.
There was no room for
them in the inn.

We, too, are wand'ring
refugee people,
missing our loved ones.
Highways we roam.
Jesus, once homeless
king without castle:
send us a God-star,
Lord bring us home.

Jenni Lee Boyden and Rusty Edwards (c)2005

I was at first startled at the concept of Jesus being homeless, but surely he must have felt homeless at times in his ministry when he was misunderstood and rejected. Try as we might, I fear that Jesus's words are still being misunderstood. Perhaps the secularizing of the Beatitudes is a good thing. It gives us permission to think critically rather than literally about the "blessed are's" and "woe to you's" of the Bible. We English speaking people need to remember that the King James Version of the Bible or the NIV or our NRSV, that we have grown up with is not the true context of the Bible. Jesus did not speak in proper King's English. Nor were the Beatitudes first spoken in the near-perfect

Greek of the Gospel of Luke. Nor in original Hebrew. In his own culture Jesus spoke Aramaic. I wondered what difference it might make if we heard the Beatitudes in Aramaic. In the Greek or in the Hebrew, there is no equivalent for the “blessed are” statements, in fact there are no verbs in the Aramaic version of the Beatitudes. So ‘Blessed are you who are poor’ becomes “O the blessedness of the poor.” Rather than simple statements of what will be, what our hopes are, we have exclamations of what already is. We are already blessed!

What of the “woes?” The Aramaic is really “wai” meaning warning or a cry of alarm. Be careful, look out, you who are rich and satisfied. Big difference, is it not? Somehow when we think of the poor as them, as those people, we don’t think of ourselves, But Jesus says Woe to us “there but for the grace of God go I.” I believe that Jim and I had crossed that line. We had at one time lived large, and then a storm put us in a place and time where I learned that I am them and they are me. When the line between them and us is blurred, perhaps we have to recognize that the line may not be just blurry, perhaps it never existed. Many have tried to translate the “woe” statements as damned, that is that the rich, those whose bellies are full, even the joyful are damned. We, you and I, are damned to hell? Well, no! The idea of hell as a place of eternal punishment is not a concept from Jesus’s time. This was not put into Jesus’s message and life until later when the Greeks interpreted Jesus’s teachings. So let us keep the context of the text in mind and not put our modern interpretations into the Beatitudes that make them misspeak Jesus’s intent.

Don’t misunderstand me, the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, and the persecuted are our responsibility. But I think we would be unwise to translate full responsibility for caring for refugees and the poor and the hungry into blaming and condemning ourselves for their plight. Yes, we are guilty of individual and corporate sin, but we – the rich and satisfied, the joyous, and popular – can be of help to others by virtue of the great benefits

we have. Indeed I think that is where the beatitudes touch us – where the beatitudes are most relevant.

St. Andrew's By-the Sea may be without a home soon, but we surely are blessed for we will not be without resources! Jim and I were without a home after Katrina, but we were blessed – we had our retirements to tap into – until it was gone.¹ My prayer is that we claim how blessed we are. And I pray that we might see new ways we can help those who need our human touch – those who need a God star.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ This is how good the Holy Spirit is: We had been sharing one salary, and we ran out of our retirement funds the day before I started at my new church (another St. Andrew's). Indeed it had been seven years since we had two salaries.