

Why Preach a Sermon Series on the Beatitudes?

Mark Ramsey

Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church, Austin, Texas

and Kristy Farber

Mercer Island Presbyterian Church, Mercer Island, Washington

It was at a high school awards assembly where an off-brand version of the Beatitudes was offered (for some reason that has long since been forgotten) that it became evident that these blessings of Jesus may be in need of refocusing. Our culture likes soft words like *blessing*. The idea of a blessing can be placed in any number of situations. In most uses, “blessing” is a non-threatening good wish that costs nothing and asks little.

We preached a series of sermons on the Beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew 5 to try to reclaim the power of these words to shape our active life of faith. We wanted to engage the congregation we were serving at the time in a deeper exploration on how “blessings” are closely related to ethics, faith development, and the consequences of following Jesus today. Far from being soft, benign good wishes, Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount—and the Beatitudes within—filled with expectations for our participation in the Kingdom of God. It is the reshaping of our imagination of how to live as God’s children that was the focus of our exploration of the Beatitudes.

We proceeded through the series focusing on spiritual geography—how are the Beatitudes lived out in real time by people like us? To further illustrate this, we preached scriptural texts alongside the Beatitudes that illuminated how these blessings are made real by the power of God working through the lives of those in the Bible—the laborers in the vineyard, Jacob wrestling until dawn, Jesus in the moments of his betrayal and arrest, and Paul and Silas in prison.

“Geography” (first in a series on the Beatitudes) *Genesis 32:22-26 and Matthew 5:1-16*

Mark Ramsey

Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church, Austin, Texas

It seems that a sought after token of “the good life” today is also one of the most unattainable, at least according to *The Wall Street Journal*. It’s a cell phone number with Manhattan’s 212 area code. It used to be that area codes were geographic: I grew up in the Central Illinois 309 area code and went to college in Central Virginia’s 804. Now, it doesn’t matter if you live in California or New Jersey, in Asheville or Peoria; if you want to be seen as “having what it takes,” you get a New York City 212 area code.

Apparently, some people are going to great lengths in manipulating the system

to obtain a “212,” no matter where they are. One media consultant says, “Since your phone number is quite literally your calling card, those numbers can say a lot about you, no matter where you actually are located, and connote a certain savvy.”¹

Larry Richardson had a different approach. Larry lives in Mulvane, Kansas. He decided to build a bridge over Cowskin Creek—“a muddy rivulet that winds through croplands there”—with a 150-foot self-styled replica of the Golden Gate Bridge, using salvaged materials, family labor, and nearly \$5,000 of his own money (much to the chagrin of his wife). “We just used a postcard and tried to make it look like it should,” Richardson told a reporter last week. As a news article noted, “For nearly a decade now, where a couple of cottonwood trees used to stand, this bridge has served as a Midwest monument to dreams of distant places.”²

Apart from cell phones and iconic bridges relocated to Kansas, it’s so tempting to want to change our geography in the blink of an eye. We know too well the landscape of our world on this bright morning: we’ve spent the summer in a culture that is careening from fear...to hate...to intolerance...to confusion...to even more fear:

Muslims are attacked, and their religion is vilified.

Immigrants are seen as “them” — never “us” — always “them.”

1,278 of our service men and women have died in combat in Afghanistan to go with the 4,420 US deaths in Iraq since March, 2003.³

And add to that the countless Iraqi and Afghani deaths.

95,000 of our fellow citizens lost their homes just in the last month.

43.6 million Americans today live in poverty, including one out of every five children.

51 million Americans this morning have no health insurance.⁴

In 1964, in an address to Congress, President Lyndon Johnson said about the War on Poverty, “The richest country on our planet can afford to win this war. We cannot afford to lose it.” Forty-five years later, there are days it seems lost, and the geography of our lives seems quite rocky.

Against this perilous landscape, we try to throw anything at it that we can think of. Every generation has its ways—its “conventional wisdom”—to try to help us deal with the hard times and hard places of life. This conventional wisdom circles the globe. David Crystal has distilled some of these bits in his book *Proverbial Wisdom from Around the World*:

When two elephants tussle, it’s the grass that suffers. (Zanzibar)

Don’t call the alligator a big-mouth till you have crossed the river.

(Belize)

If you want one year of prosperity, grow grain. If you want 10 years of prosperity, grow trees. If you want 100 years of prosperity, grow people.

(China)

Slowness comes from God and quickness from the devil. (Morocco)

Pray to God, but continue to row to the shore. (Russia)

Do not blame God for having created the tiger, but thank God for not having given it wings. (Ethiopia)

Before going to war say one prayer; before going to sea, two; before getting married, three. (Poland)⁵

There may well be some wisdom in there among the cultural insights, but has our geography changed after we digest those? What difference do any of those proverbs make? We might do as well just changing our cell phone number. It seems that a lot that passes for wisdom, or even more, a lot that we call a “blessing” doesn’t really change much at all. “Blessing,” of course, brings to mind the Beatitudes. These “blessings” are found at the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel. “Blessings” of course, are everywhere.

Some may not be spelled out as such, but blessings are everywhere. There are the blessings of “received wisdom.” You know these without me even having to line them out: Blessed are those who climb the corporate ladder; they will be blessed with a comfortable retirement. Blessed are those who invest shrewdly, especially in a volatile market; they will be afforded many opportunities. There are even more “self-evident blessings” that don’t need to explain the payoff: Blessed are those with a superb education. Blessed are the free. Blessed are the happy.

Of course, Jesus never said any of those. In fact, Jesus seemed to go out of his way to not speak in those words or offer those kinds of “formulas for successful living.” It isn’t Jesus who says, “Blessed are the cool. Blessed are the good-looking, for they will find plenty of friends.” To enter into the world of the Beatitudes, we need to reintroduce ourselves to the word *blessing*, as in, “Blessed are the....”

“Blessing” in our time has become something like winning the lottery. Or working some magic. Or somebody else working some magic. Or a type of religiously induced superstition. But the blessings of the Beatitudes point us in a different direction. These blessings are not transactions with the holy nor are they good luck charms or “to do lists.” These Beatitudes don’t fit neatly or conveniently into our world of striving or aspiring.

“Why do we torture ourselves with things we don’t have and aren’t likely to get?” David Brooks has written. “Why do we eagerly seek out images of lives we are unlikely to lead? It’s precisely because fantasy, imagination, and dreaming play a far more significant role in our makeup than we are accustomed to acknowledging. We are influenced, far more than most of us admit, by some longing for completion, some impulse toward heaven.”⁶

When the crowds gathered that day on the mountain in front of Jesus, I believe they had similar longings. They aspired for more than what they had, for more than who they were. But these Beatitudes had to be jarring to all their aspirations. Blessed are the poor in spirit? Blessed are those who mourn? Those who are meek and merciful and pure in heart? Blessed are those who hunger and thirst not for popularity or acceptance, not for acquisitions or achievements, but for righteousness? Blessed are the peacemakers and the persecuted?

Really Jesus? Have you seen our world? Have you heard the cries of those for whom righteousness is a pipe dream? Jesus opened his teaching ministry *not* to throw cold water on our desires, but to whet our appetites, to heighten our desire, to excite our imagination (long dulled by a series of fake “blessings”), to invite us toward heaven.⁷

James Howell, referring to the Beatitudes, wrote, “To discern the plot of Jesus’

story, to ‘get it,’ to let our mental map be crumpled up and then smoothed back out in Jesus’ upside down way of giving directions, we need to be suspicious of the banter we overhear day in and day out. We need to be prepared for Jesus’ words to take a long time to have their way with us, much less with anybody else out there.”⁸

Archbishop Oscar Romero pointed directly at this challenge in a sermon he preached in El Salvador in 1979 while being harassed by government henchmen who assassinated him one year later. In the midst of all that, Romero preached, “The world does not say: blessed are the poor.” “The world says, blessed are the rich. You are worth as much as you have. But Christ says: wrong. Blessed are the poor... because they do not put their trust in what is so transitory. Blessed are the poor, for they know their riches are in the One who being rich made himself poor in order to enrich us with his poverty, teaching us true wisdom.” Romero concluded his sermon:

The Beatitudes are not something we can understand fully, and that is why there are young people especially who think that the love of the Beatitudes is not going to bring about a better world—and who opt for violence, for guerilla war, for revolution. The church will never make that its path. The church does not choose those ways of violence and whatever is said to that effect is slander. The church’s option is for what Christ says in the Beatitudes. I am not surprised, though, that this is not understood. We are all impatient and want a better world right away. But Christ, who preached this message 20 centuries ago knew he was sowing a long-term moral revolution in which we human beings come to change ourselves from worldly thinking.”⁹

Father Greg Boyle, who works with the gangs of South Central L.A., a landscape quite unaccustomed to “authentic blessings” has said,

Scripture scholars contend that the original language of the Beatitudes should not be rendered “Blessed are the single-hearted” or “Blessed are the peacemakers” or “Blessed are those who struggle for justice.” Greater precision in translation would say: “You are in the right place if you are single-hearted or work for peace. You are in the right place if you are struggling for justice.” The Beatitudes are not spirituality after all. They are geography. They tell us where to stand.¹⁰

From 1989 to 2003, the West African nation of Liberia was brutalized in its own civil war. Close to 250,000 were killed, and many more became homeless. Fourteen years of war left the country’s economy in shambles and its communities overrun with weapons. It was in the midst of that devastation and chaos that a small group of Liberian Christians fed hope. The landscape of their cities, towns, and countryside were littered with bomb and shell casings—part of war’s pollution. They began to gather them, and with those empty rounds of ammunition, they put themselves to work. They would take an empty shell from the civil war and cut it and reform it into the shape of a cross. The people who made it are part of a group called Liberians Against Violence. They are victims of Liberia’s war—civilians and former soldiers—who are now generating income for themselves and their communities by fashioning these

crosses. They are making an impact on the geography of a nation that has an 80% unemployment rate.¹¹

The blessings that Jesus conveys in the Beatitudes are not pie-in-the-sky wishes. These blessings are not winning the lottery. Jesus' Beatitudes are geography—they tell you where to stand. They re-form the landscape into the contours of God's hope. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus opened his ministry by going up on a hill and preaching a sermon. He opened the sermon that opened his ministry... by talking about blessings. Jesus' blessings were not conventional or received wisdom. They were not superstition or a grab at magic. They changed the geography of life. When geography changes around us, then all the usual paths, trails, roads, and byways are likewise transformed. Our travels and our trajectory have to adapt to the contours of our new surroundings.

Fred Buechner once wrote, "If you want to know who you really are as opposed to who you think you are, look where your feet are taking you."¹² The Beatitudes tell us where our feet should take us, they tell us where we should stand.

You're in the right place if
... you are in a place where you can be poor in spirit;
... you are a mourner seeking comfort,
... you walk with the meek, if you look around, and you are surrounded by
folks who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
... you are merciful, if you are pure in heart.
... you are a peacemaker, even if you get persecuted for it.

You walk there. You stand there. You will find the landscape of your life changed. You have to walk differently on this new terrain. We have to get our bearings carefully in these new surroundings. Together, we head out on a new trajectory, watchful and hopeful all at the same time. And when we begin to experience the very geography of our troubled world being healed, we know we are in the right place. Now, that... that is a blessing.

Notes

1 Caroline Wexler, "212 Lust: Old Phone Numbers Are New Thing in Tech Scene," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 18, 2010.

2 A.G. Sulzberger, "A Golden Gate Fantasy on the Kansas Prairie," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2010.

3 Combat death statistics from www.icasualties.org.

4 The origin of this sermon is a few years old, though it is notable that while the statistics may be different in 2017, many of these issues have only deepened.

5 Taken from *Context*, edited by Martin Marty, June, 2010, Part A.

6 David Brooks, *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (and Always Have) in the Future Tense* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 199.

7 James Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today*.

8 Ibid.

9 Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*, trans. by James R Brockman (Walden, New York: Plough, 1998), 33-34.

10 Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2010), 74-75.

11 From the sermon, "Living Into Hope" by Ben Johnston-Krase, First Presbyterian Church, Racine, Wisconsin, May 30, 2010.

12 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1973), p. 31.