

Matthew's telling of the story of Jesus, the Son of God, continues. He's called his disciples and they've been walking around Galilee, talking about the Kingdom of God and curing diseases. And people are noticing. Wherever they go there are crowds joining the disciples, following Jesus.

When Jesus sees the crowds, Matthew tells us, "he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him."

Let's pause here to make sure we watch this scene, in slow motion, frame-by-frame. First, Jesus sees the crowds. Second, he goes up the mountain. *Does anyone go with him?* No. *What do the disciples do?* They wait until Jesus sits down, then go to him. *What about the crowd, where are they?* At the foot of the mountain. *Where have we seen this scene before?* Mt. Sinai.

As he's been doing all along in his story, Matthew is placing Jesus, the Son of God, squarely into the history of his people. Moses at the top of the mountain, receiving the Word of God written on stone tablets while the people waited for him at the foot of the mountain...this is a foundational story for these people who are descendants of Jacob. Matthew has our attention. He's recalling the Sinai event, the giving of the Mosaic Law. He's placing Jesus into the Moses role. But we know by now that while Matthew's continuing the story, he's also re-interpreting and re-imagining it. We can be sure that the Word that is being given by the Son of God, the God of Bread, will be Good News...and it will be disturbing and discomfoting and disorienting....

So...once Jesus is seated...and once his disciples have gathered around them...he begins teaching them: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek...those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...the merciful..."

Not only is the visual scene familiar, but the script is also familiar.

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers.... (Psa 1.1)

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. (Psa 32.1)

Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding.... (Pro 3:13) Happy are those who do not blunder with their lips, and need not suffer remorse for sin. (Sirach 14:1)

Happy are we, O [House of Jacob], for we know what is pleasing to God. (Baruch 4:4)

The refrain, "blessed are" is a familiar one in the Wisdom tradition. It's alternately translated "happy are." It could also be translated as *fortunate*, or, *highly favored (by God)*. Underlying these "happy are" claims is an assumption that good people are blessed and bad people are not. Those who are forgiven, who are righteous, who do what God wants, are blessed. And their lives are good, happy lives. They're prosperous and healthy and satisfied. In contrast, if you sin, not only are you not-blessed, but the circumstances of your life will follow your sin. This worldview assumes that if you're sick or poor or bad things happen to you, it's because you've sinned or otherwise displeased God. (Job's friends were solidly in this way of thinking.) Being blessed = being good = good. Being vulnerable in any way = being bad = bad.

So here comes Jesus and he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...happy are those who mourn...fortunate are the meek...highly favored are those who hunger and thirst..." Can't you just see the disciples going, "What?!" They must have been scratching their heads, looking at each other, utterly confused.

And here I need to name my internal smugness and disdain for the disciples. When I look, I see that I'm all too ready to believe the lie that I already know what Jesus is talking about when he started teaching them...the lie that says I don't have anything to learn this morning...the lie that the disciples, unlike me, were stumbling fools.

Now that the lie is exposed, I'm ready to actually listen, this time ready to learn, ready for Jesus to teach me.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they *will be* comforted.” In each of these beatitudes, Jesus uses the same formula, beginning with *blessed are*. Being *blessed* is an adjective; he's describing what *already is* for people who never expect blessing. He follows the repeating description with an outcome. The outcome of the first and last beatitudes is the kingdom of heaven. The outcome of the beatitudes in the middle are a response, or a healing that correlates to the condition—the *mourners* will be *comforted*.

But there's something else to learn. In beatitudes 1 and 8, the outcome is already given, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. It's present tense. Jesus is describing another condition that already is. And with just these few sentences, Jesus' teaching is turning the world upside down and into utter chaos! The kingdom of heaven *already is*. And it's here, now. And it belongs to the poor in spirit, the powerless, the vulnerable. In declaring that all these vulnerable people in these lowly and bad circumstances and conditions are already blessed, Jesus is seriously challenging the cause-effect assumptions about how the world works! If sin doesn't cause misfortune, then what does? If misfortune isn't a sign of God's absence, then what does it mean? This teaching disrupts the common understanding found in both the Mosaic Law and the Wisdom tradition. Not to mention the teaching of white, middle-class, Westerners. Jesus' teaching requires repentance, conversion... a complete transformation of our understandings of how the world works. And a conversion in our understanding of how God works.

“Theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.” We tend to think of heaven as a place beyond this place...it's up there, in space...and it's out there, in time. “We'll experience heaven after we die...but for now we have earth to deal with.” That's my default thinking. But listening to Jesus, he asserts, “theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.” He's not saying, “theirs *will be* the kingdom of heaven.” “Theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.”

Here we have Matthew's incarnational theology. The kingdom of heaven is God's space, God's realm. God's kingdom isn't up there or out there; it's here. The kingdom of heaven is now, on earth. Which means that God is here, now, on earth. And not only is God here, but God's blessings are here, God's favor is already here. This is *not* how the Mosaic Law has been interpreted or understood. Nor is it the teaching of the Wisdom tradition. And when I stop and look, it isn't my understanding or interpretation of God and life either.

The kingdom of heaven is not what we've imagined or assumed it is. Even though we've had 2,000 years of hearing this teaching, we should be scratching our heads, just as confounded as the disciples were. With powerful simplicity this teaching challenges human judgments and strategies—whether those have been shaped by the Mosaic Law or the Wisdom tradition or by white, Western, Christian tradition and culture.

This was Paul's message. In the passage from 1 Corinthians, he asserts the foolishness of the cross. And if we missed it the first time, he repeats it nine more times! The cross is foolish. By all understandings of the Mosaic and Wisdom traditions, the kingdom of heaven is foolish. Jesus' teaching, which includes the cross, doesn't follow our assumptions about how the world works.

If the Hebrew tradition relied on the Mosaic Law and on signs, and the Greek tradition relied on the Wisdom teachings, what does our tradition rely on? I'm not sure, but I've been pondering and speculating. We who are white and part of dominant culture have been shaped by colonialism and capitalism and white supremacy and technology (and on and on). I wonder if one of our underlying assumptions is that life is a problem to be fixed...and if we're smart enough we can make the right plan to fix the problem. We can conquer life...just like we've been conquering lands and peoples.

In the beatitudes, we hear Jesus teaching that there isn't a problem. However people are, whatever their condition, whatever the condition of their lives, God is already here, God's blessing is already here, God's kingdom is already theirs.

Last week at Eastern Mennonite Seminary's School for Leadership Training, Christena Cleveland (social psychologist and public theologian) was one of the presenters. She teaches at Duke and travels around the country as well, speaking and teaching in a variety of settings. Much of her work centers on diversity and race and privilege. She's an African-American woman. She told the story about a young, white seminarian who, filled with a good theological training and insights was eager to tackle the problems of poverty and race in his community. He asked for her advice, for how he should go about it...what would be effective. Christena paused and then responded, "Nothing." She pointed out that Jesus worked on the margins, and that change happens on the margins, with the marginalized. We know this not only from the biblical story, but also from looking at history. So she told this young man to go home, to do good work, and to follow the lead of people of color, of women, of those on the margins. And she invited us who were overwhelmingly white, and mostly men, and well-educated and experienced...she challenged us to *be last*. To choose being followers.

Choosing to be last is foolish. It turns upside down all my understandings and interpretations and senses of responsibility. Yet, this is what I hear in Jesus' teaching...a compelling invitation to live in a world that is already blessed, a world that God already inhabits, a world where God's favor is already given. In Jesus' words we hear a call to see the world and those in it not as problems to be fixed or conquered...but a world and people to join, to be part of, to follow where they lead.

"God chose what is foolish in the world to humiliate the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the powerful..." I wonder if this is a time for us who identify as white, middle-class, and educated, to accept Jesus' invitation...and Paul's invitation...to choose foolishness. Perhaps this is not a time for us to think or fix or conquer our way out of what we think the problems are, but a time to let our wisdom and our power be humiliated, to join the disciples, the bumbling fools that Jesus chose, following Jesus, staying close to Jesus as he teaches us to see God's kingdom, to see God's blessing in the humble, in the lowly, in our forgotten margins.

<sup>3</sup>"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup>"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup>"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup>"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup>"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for *theirs is* the kingdom of heaven.