

TEXT: Matthew 5:1-12
THEME: All moral values ultimately rest upon beliefs
SUBJECT: Belief.
TITLE: A Thought Experiment

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
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Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

You are familiar with the old joke told in response to Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom: the leopard may lie down with the lamb but the lamb will not get much sleep. Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom is, it seems, too good, too beautiful, to be true.

Scott Cairns gives expression to a similar fear about the beatitudes. He writes a poem ironically titled, "BLESSÉD."

By their very designations, we know the meek
are available for all manner of insult,
the poor have no effectual recourse against
the blithe designs of the rich, and that enigmatic
crew we recognize as merciful still refuses
to stand up for itself, which makes of them all prime
objects for whatever device the brutes ordain.
In time, they become mute relics for those who mourn.
If any still crave righteousness, they are maligned,
then stuffed with straw and burned, or hacked to bits and burned.
If the pure are anywhere present, we wouldn't
know them, which is surely to their advantage. And those
who would make peace are jailed in adjoining cells, simply
dismissed from any arena that matters now.

We don't have to pay careful attention to the world to know the rich, not the poor, are fortunate; that those who rejoice, not those who mourn, are blessed; that those who have power, not the meek, are prosperous; that those who are filled, not the hungry and thirsty, are satisfied; and that those who are well treated, not those who are persecuted, are happy.

All moral values ultimately rest upon beliefs (Alister McGrath). And we find it hard if not impossible to believe being humble, grieving, being meek, desiring what is right, being merciful, being pure in heart, being peacemakers, being persecuted for doing what is right, being falsely accused of evil, is the path to bliss because this promised bliss lies in some far off future we have lost faith in.

The beatitudes contrast a present condition with a future condition: blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted, blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. The first part describes the believer's present experience, the second sees a wrong undone or a good rewarded.

It is true, the first and eighth beatitudes - blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who are persecuted for doing what is right - have a reward expressed in the present tense: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The emphasis, however, obviously lies upon things to come. The Greek can use the present tense (proleptic present) to indicate a circumstance which, although it has not yet occurred, is regarded as so certain that it is spoken as having already happened.

We have lost faith in the certainty of the wrong being undone or of the good being rewarded. Jesus embodied the beatitudes and suffered the fate of those who do. Jesus didn't believe that fate had the last word. We find that faith hard to come by.

The beatitudes do not appeal to our common sense. They are counterintuitive in the extreme. They confront us with the authority of Jesus, who claims to reveal the ways of God. They assume a final reckoning that sets things right. They rest upon the belief that God will have the last word.

Yet, what if the beatitudes reveal the way reality works, inherently, and the final judgment is not so much an overturning of the ways of the world but a revelation of what has been true all along?

I invite you to a thought experiment, sometimes called a counterfactual argument. Lets call "blessed" the values opposite those named as "blessed" in the beatitudes.

If we are at all self-aware, paying attention to the still small voice within, we know arrogance, hard-heartedness, narcissism, deceitfulness, ruthlessness, corruption, warmongering, spineless acquiescence to evil, may secure for us power, privilege and possessions but they do not yield the satisfaction our souls crave.

Alex ran away from a military unit in El Salvador that functioned as a death squad responsible for many killings. His life in the military was not as he had imagined it would be nor was it as promised when he enlisted. He became afraid for his life and managed to escape to the United States. He was genuinely bewildered by who he had become, and found it impossible to connect his boyhood self with himself in the present.

His was the El Salvador (The Savior) strewn with leaflets that read: "Be a patriot, kill a priest;" the El Salvador of the assassination of Oscar Romero, shot elevating the host while celebrating the Eucharist in the Cathedral; the El Salvador of the murder of six Jesuit priests, their house keeper and her daughter; the El Salvador of the disappearance and murder of hundreds of thousands of poor farmers and their sympathizers.

Alex went to Capitol Hill to tell his story to congress. He soon realized his efforts on Capitol Hill were futile, for congress already knew what was going on, and had for a long time. And what was going on was fine with the elected representatives. In fact, Americans had trained the death squads.

Alex started to dream about the killings, and despite his training, these nightmares took away the peace of his sleep, and he woke, more and more often, drenched and crying out, having gazed into his own eyes in the dream as a knife wielded by his doppelgänger sawed away at his throat. "I was killing myself," he said, "using my own technique."

"I realized what they had done to me," he said. "My superior officers. They had taken my soul away and made me into a monster."

The end of the embodiment of moral values opposite the ones called blessed in the beatitudes is not bliss, happiness, joy, but the torment that follows from denying the soul its true delight: doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God.

The beatitudes reveal the way we can save, not our skin but our souls. May God have mercy on us all!