

“Blessed Are You!”

“One Sunday as they drove home from church, a little girl turned to her mother and said, ‘Mommy, there’s something about the preacher’s message this morning that I don’t understand.’ The mother said, ‘Oh? What is it?’ The little girl replied, ‘Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. He said God is so big that He could hold the whole world in His hand. Is that true?’ The mother replied, ‘Yes, that’s true, honey.’ ‘But Mommy, he also said that God comes to live inside of us when we believe in Jesus as our Savior. Is that true, too?’ Again, the mother assured the little girl that what the pastor had said was true. With a puzzled look on her face the little girl then asked, ‘If God is bigger than us and He lives in us, wouldn’t He show through?’”

After telling that story, Jerry Shirley concludes, “That is what the beatitudes are about - God showing through.” (Jerry Shirley, “When God Shows Through”)

A collection of teachings, which Jesus is reported to have taught during his Sermon on the Mount is called “the Beatitudes”. That title was given to that group of Jesus’ sayings because each of them starts with the word, **“Blessed”**. Much of today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading includes “the Beatitudes” statements. What? You don’t recall hearing me read any **“Blessed”** teachings? That is because our Today’s English Version – the Good News pew Bibles translates the first word of each of those sayings with the word, **“Happy”**.

Being **“Happy”** and **“Blessed”** don’t seem to be the same thing, do they? So, why would the translators choose to use two different terms? My answer to those questions begins with recognizing Jesus shared those teachings during his Sermon on the Mount based on his declaration of the presence of God’s Domain. With **“the Kingdom of Heaven”** or **“Kingdom of God”** as the assumed setting, Jesus shared how people belonging to God would be transformed – be **“Blessed”** – be made **“Happy”**.

Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann was one of my Old Testament professors at Eden Theological Seminary. In a book he co-wrote, Brueggemann describes how the Old Testament Lectionary Reading from Micah 6:1-8 also shares the message of how one lives in response to God’s Reign. Brueggemann explains, “Do justice, to be actively engaged in the redistribution of power in the world, to correct the systemic inequalities that marginalize some for the excessive enhancement of others.

Love covenant loyalty, the translation of **‘kindness’** is disastrously weak. The word **‘hesed’** means to reorder life into a community of enduring relations of fidelity.

Walk humbly with God, to abandon all self-sufficiency, to acknowledge in daily attitude and act that life is indeed derived from the reality of God”. (Walter Brueggemann, “A Lectionary Commentary Based on NRSV – Year A”).

The last two sentences of today’s Call To Worship from the Lectionary New Testament Epistle Reading came from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians and it continues to raise up the impact of God’s Kingdom on the lives of believers and why we have reason to be called **“Blessed”** or **“Happy”**. Paul told the Corinthian Church community, **“God has brought you into union with Christ Jesus, and God has made Christ to be our wisdom. By him we are put right with God; we become God’s holy people and are set free.”**

Much of the Beatitudes reported in the Gospel of Matthew have parallels in the Gospel of Luke’s report about Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain. Let’s examine closely the Beatitudes from Matthew and when a parallel is found in Luke, let’s consider how Luke’s version helps inform us about what Jesus meant in those teachings.

The first beatitude Matthew reports is, **“Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor; the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them!”** Now, let’s compare the parallel in Luke, where Jesus taught, **“Happy are you poor; the Kingdom of God is yours!”** It seems Matthew or his source was inclined to spiritualize this specific teaching. Indeed, there are some folks, even today, who prefer the spiritualization of this saying! I suspect some, if not many, of the rich prefer Matthew’s version, while all of the poor are comforted by the truth expressed in Luke’s account!

Although the Gospel of Matthew puts a heavy emphasis on Judaism and Jewish Christianity, Luke, which was written especially for the gentile or non-Jewish Christians, is ironically much closer to the message of the prophetic tradition than is Matthew’s description. So, I see Jesus’ teaching more in line with Luke’s report. Coming at this out of the context of Jesus sharing insights about the lives of believers when they live the way of the Kingdom of God, Jesus explained **those who are poor will be “Blessed” – “Happy” – comforted – transformed**. If you or I believe the riches of our lives are money and expensive clothes, jewelry, transportation, and housing, then we have not been transformed into living out a commitment to **God’s Love, Will, and Kingdom being of the greatest value and importance**.

Matthew next reported Jesus teaching, **“Happy are those who mourn; God will comfort them!”** The parallel in Luke says Jesus said, **“Happy are you who weep now; you will laugh!”** Clearly, both gospels testify to Jesus announcing how those, who experience grief in this world, will eventually receive **“comfort” and joy** because of the Son of God’s Victory of Life over Death and because of the Eternal Life we will experience in God’s Fulfilled Kingdom.

Jesus continues in Matthew, ***“Happy are those who are humble; they will receive what God has promised!”*** Being humble means we recognize God’s Reign over us and that only God can enable us to receive what the Divine Parent has promised.

Matthew continues reporting Jesus said, ***“Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires; God will satisfy them fully!”*** However, Luke’s account includes Jesus declaring, ***“Happy are you who are hungry now; you will be filled!”*** Matthew seems focused on desiring ***“to do what God requires”***, while Luke zeros in on those ***“who are hungry now”***.

Matthew’s version has Jesus say of those desiring God’s requirements, ***“God will satisfy them fully!”*** Whereas Luke’s Jesus says of those who hunger for food, ***“you will be filled!”*** Matthew’s account would seem to be the more accurate, if Jesus had a high concern with giving out a whole group of new laws for everyone to follow. Luke’s version, on the other hand, seems more in line with perceiving Jesus’ teachings revealed how one’s life is **Transformed when following Jesus – living the New Life in Christ – acting as a citizen of God’s Kingdom.**

Continuing on, Jesus teaches in Matthew, ***“Happy are those who are merciful to others; God will be merciful to them!”*** Jesus did not explain whether God’s Mercy was conditioned on having mercy on others or merely when living in the Kingdom Way, one is merciful as God is ***“merciful”***. I vote for the second choice – following Jesus – living according to his example – one is merciful and receives God’s Mercy.

Jesus’ next beatitude in Matthew is, ***“Happy are the pure in heart; they will see God!”*** Living, as one who follows Jesus’ example, means you and I will not have ulterior motives but, instead, we will be honest and truthful. It is with such honesty and integrity, you and I truly perceive God.

Next in Matthew, Jesus taught, ***“Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them His children!”*** Living out the example of Jesus means you and I don’t merely desist from being violent but seek to bring wholeness, understanding, and reconciliation with one another, the Creation, and with God. Such living demonstrates we are transformed into the children of our Divine Parent.

The last beatitudes in Matthew are closely related because they deal with faithfulness to God and how that results in persecution. This area of concern was evidently very important to either Jesus or to Matthew and/or his sources because this subject has three ***“Blessed”*** or ***“Happy”*** statements. The first is brief, ***“Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!”***

The parallel in Luke says Jesus declared two beatitudes, ***“Happy are you when people hate you, reject you, insult you, and say that you are evil, all because of the Son of Man! Be glad when that happens and dance for joy, because a great reward is kept for you in heaven. For their ancestors did the very same things to the prophets.”*** The second and third beatitude statements about persecution in Matthew’s version are very close to Luke’s for Jesus said, ***“Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers.’ ‘Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven. This is how the prophets who lived before you were persecuted.”***

Taking all of the Beatitudes together, we are reminded of the life one lives when following Jesus Christ, the Son of God! The **Blessings – Happiness**, which we experience because we live out our commitment to Jesus Christ are a **Great Comfort and Encouragement and our Source of Joy and Hope!**

Keeping all of that in mind leads us to also recall how this is all available for us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Pastor and Theologian, who was martyred by Hitler’s regime, reminds us of the source of our blessings and relationship, when he wrote, “Having reached the end of the Beatitudes, we naturally ask if there is any place on this earth for the community which they describe. Clearly, there is one place, and only one, and that is where the Poorest, Meekest, and most sorely Tried of all men is to be found - on the cross at Golgotha. The community which is the subject of the Beatitudes is the community of the crucified. With Him it has lost all, and with him it has found all.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Cost of Discipleship”)

The little girl told her mother in the opening story, “If God is bigger than us and He lives in us, wouldn’t He show through?” Yes, God “showed through” when Jesus Christ came as the ultimate expression of God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial ***“Agape” Love!*** Since Jesus calls you and me to follow him and his example, following that call and example entails some hardship and difficulty for us but it also comes with being ***“Blessed”*** – ***“Happy”*** because in our Life in Christ, we are joint heirs with him of God’s Blessings and Happiness! **Blessed Are You! Amen.**