

## The Blessed Upside-Down

Back in Jesus' day there was a category of pithy practical sayings called "beatitudes." A few of them show up in the Psalms, for instance:

**Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth.  
Blessed is the man who has his quiver full of them! Ps. 127:4**

In those days before Social Security and Medicare, sons were a hedge against the vicissitudes of old age. A quiver full of sons was as good as money in an IRA. "Blessed" was the man with a good supply of y chromosomes.

People in Jesus' day were used to hearing down-to-earth, practical advice in the form of a beatitude.

- Blessed are those who keep looking over their shoulder, watching their rear, for nobody will ever get the jump on them.
- Blessed are those who preserve their good credit rating, for they will get a favorable mortgage.

That kind of thing. Beatitudes were statements about the way things work in the real world.

This is just the kind of thing that is supposed draw younger people into church these days. Google the churches in town. Count the number of websites that promise, "practical, down-to-earth teaching."

*None of that theology stuff for me, thank you very much. When I come to church, give me something I can use.*

I got a call once from a person who had been thumbing through his Bible for hours, looking for a particular saying of Jesus. Finally he gave up in frustration and called the first church he found online.

"You'll know this," he said. "I've heard this all my life, so tell me where in the Bible it says, *God helps those who help themselves.*"

Oh, yes. You'll find that in First Corinthians 13:12: "Blessed are the self-sufficient."

Jesus turns the genre of beatitude on its head. Or rather he turns our world of cause-and-effect, tit-for-tat, virtue-and-reward on its head. He says blessed are the poor. Blessed are the hungry. Blessed are the meek. He turns what we call the "real world" upside-down.

The very people we call losers, Jesus calls winners. The homeless souls who will sleep at the Keraney Center tonight. The folks who are about to lose their medical insurance under our new President. The folks who have lived here most of their lives, but don't have a green card. Jesus calls these people "blessed," "happy." According to Jesus, God has a thing for people like that. They have a special place in God's kingdom.

First place.

It's no wonder the church, through the ages, has had a hard time figuring out what to do with these Beatitudes of Jesus. Some have tried to turn them into rules – not for ordinary Christians, maybe – but for people who are *really, really*, religious. Nuns, monks, hermits, tithers on before-tax income – people like that. Even though there's not a single "should" or "ought" in these Beatitudes, people have used them to separate serious Christians from the run-of-the-mill variety.

Others have said they're counsels of perfection – impossible goals no one can reach and most people find depressing. I suspect that most Christians simply ignore them.

But suppose the question isn't, "What should we do with these Beatitudes?" but "What do these Beatitudes do with us?" It's hard to see the answer unless we stand on our heads.

The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says that the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel can be summed up in one phrase: "Blessed are the upside-down." She's right. These sayings speak not about the world as we usually see it, from our lofty perch as those whose stomachs are full and futures are secure -- not from the top looking down, but from the bottom looking up.

Will Willimon writes,

Whether these descriptions of the blessed sound like good news or bad news depends, to a great extent, on where you happen to be standing when you get the news. For those of us up on the top, which is most of us in church at this moment – those of us who are well-fed, well-housed, well-futured – the notion that God’s kingdom takes place on the bottom, blessing those on the bottom before it moves upward, may strike us as bad news.

But if you’re on the bottom -- the meek, the disinherited, the poor in spirit and otherwise -- the bad news for those on the top is your good news. The Beatitudes are not so much something we’re to do, but something we’re to see. This is to see the world as God sees it.

Or think of it this way: Jesus is painting a picture of the world as it shall look to us when you and I arrive at full maturity, when we grow into the baptism that marks our birth into God’s kingdom. With that maturity comes a new pair of eyes, eyes to see the kingdom even as it’s growing.

A few years ago, when the Presbyterians were debating about whether or not to allow what we then called “self-affirming, practicing homosexuals” to become ordained ministers, a discussion took place at an educational event sponsored by the Presbytery of Florida.

It was one of those panel discussions meant to keep the conversation as civil as possible. Speakers on the panel were all well-mannered and meticulously prepared. They laid out their cases for and against. It was all done decently and in order. The audience was instructed to write down any questions on 3 x 5 index cards, and the moderator would read them out loud. I could tell the moderator didn’t much like that restriction, but those were the rules. Presbyterians are good at rules.

I doubt that anyone left the meeting having changed his or her mind.

I went to the cafeteria, got my lunch on a tray, and sat down to eat it across from a minister I barely knew, even though he’s been in the presbytery for several years now. He’s a retired military chaplain who obviously still gets his hair cut on base. He was wearing civilian clothes, but he still has the bearing

a military man. I hadn't even remembered his name. I've always thought of him as "Chaplain Spit and Polish."

"I saw you in there," he said.

"Oh, no," I thought. "Here it comes."

"They said you were to speak for this amendment at the presbytery meeting next month. Did I hear that right?"

"Yes, sir," I said. (I've never served in the military. I don't know why I said that).

"So you think the church ought to ordain gays," he said.

"If they've got the gifts and the call and they're living faithful lives, Yes."

He stared down at his pork chop and mashed potatoes. When he looked up again, he had tears in his eyes.

Then he told me about his son, his gay son, who grew up confused and scared and with no where to turn.

"I knew something was different about him," he said. "Even when he was a little boy, there was something about him I didn't have words for. When he was a teenager, I kept trying to change him. Why don't you go out with this girl, or that one, I'd say. He did. He tried as hard as he could, but now I know he couldn't have changed his feelings any more than I could grow wings and fly.

"I didn't know how to help him. I'd been taught that homosexuals would burn in hell, and nobody had ever told me different. He got into the drug scene and would be gone from home for days. He went to bars to meet men. He got into trouble with the law. Eventually an older man took him in. I used to hate that man, but now I realize that man saved my son's life.

"Our son's home with us now. His schizophrenia is being managed with medication. He receives a disability check. He'll never be able to live by himself. He'd end up on the streets again, and dead within a couple of years.

“But you know, through all those years, the church people never turned their backs on my son. It didn’t matter if it was base chapels or little country churches. The people in church still opened their hearts. The church was the one place where my son was always welcome.”

We didn’t talk anymore about votes and amendments. We just sat across from one another, sharing an intimacy I’d never dreamed possible between me and that man.

That man knows what it’s like to see the kingdom of God from the bottom looking up. He knows who Jesus has in mind when he says the last will be first and the first last. He knows what it means to be meek and poor in spirit. He knows what it means to feel blessed.

Looking from the top down, we think we know, but we don’t. We think we see the world as it really is. We don’t.

Blessed are those who see what God sees. Blessed are the upside-down.

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