

January 16, 2011
Matthew 5:1-12
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Sermon on the Mount: Beatitudes
Honorable are those who mourn.

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE:

We're beginning a four-week series on material from the Sermon on the Mount found in the gospel of Matthew, chapters 5-7. These materials are a comprehensive collection of the teachings of Jesus presented as a single teaching. This series begins with what we called the Beatitudes.

SERMON:

Blessed are

Count your blessings! Usually that exhortation is meant to encourage us to focus on the good things in our lives - good family, good job, good health, good friends, etc. Yet, the blessings in the Beatitudes are a counterintuitive list. In contemporary English it might read -blessed are those who are depressed, those who are grieving, those who are last in line, those who are picked on by classmates for defending an outcast in the class. Are we inclined to count these blessings?

Each of the beatitudes begins with a Greek word *makarios*, which is translated "blessed." It is not the obvious word for blessed in Greek. It is a nuanced word that translators struggle to convey its meaning. Some scholars have suggested it should be translated 'happy,' which is what you find in the Good News Bible translation. However, most scholars agree the word happy is too associated with emotions in English. Some have suggested we use the word 'joy' to convey a deeper spiritual sense of well being with God. In the end most recommend

staying with the word blessed. However, as I was exploring that word this week, I was struck by how its use in the Psalms is a reference to God not to people.

As I kept exploring this term, I found a couple of people who suggested that instead of 'blessed' we consider using the word 'honorable.' These scholars commented on the honor/shame character of the culture in which Jesus lived. They pointed out that the beatitudes upend many of the normative expectations of the time as to who is honorable and who is shameful. This upending of cultural norms is very much in character with Jesus' way of viewing God's Spirit in the world.

One of the things about the use of the word honorable is that it reminds us that the reflections in the Beatitudes are not just about individuals but are about the ways we live together in community. When we use the words blessed, happy, or joyful, the emphasis tends to be on the individual. When we use the word honorable, it expands our vision to the context of community. It reminds us that all the situations described in the Beatitudes may refer to individual experiences, but they occur in the context of community, and sometimes it's about all of us.

In light of Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend and the events in Tucson, AZ this past week-both of which are about our life together, today we will focus on the second beatitude: "Honorable are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

The last Greek word in this Beatitude, which we translate as comforted, is also a nuanced word. It implies strengthening as well as consolation. In other words we might say, “Honorable are those who mourn, for they will be strengthened as they are consoled.”

We are a culture who tends to rush through mourning. We want people to look at the positive side of things, which is why we tell them to count their blessings. We get uncomfortable when people cry in public. People tell me they can't come to church because they don't want to cry in front of others. We want to fix things immediately.

Mourning on the other hand takes time. It has its own rhythm. Mourning is in touch with the deepest of human emotions. It requires we develop the capacity to simply sit with one another in the midst of deep pain. It requires we look at our own brokenness, our own sin, our own culpability. Mourning calls all of our lives into question. It gives us the opportunity for new steps in faith.

If we do not take the time to mourn, if we push mourning's realities aside in fear or denial, we miss the opportunity to be deeply blessed by the presence and the truth of God, to be consoled, to be strengthened.

The type of mourning referred to in the beatitude is explicitly the mourning that comes upon the death of people. This week we as a nation have mourned the six people who died in Tucson, Arizona last Saturday: Christina Green, Gabe Zimmerman, John Roll, Dorothy Morris, Phyllis Schneck, and Dorwan Stoddard. This weekend we also remember and we continue to mourn the tragic death of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

Mourning doesn't make us happy. It usually isn't included in our list of blessings, but we

know it is honorable to take the time to mourn. In fact it is crucial to mourn. For in true mourning we confront the reality of what has been lost; we look at ourselves in the mirror and examine the quality of our living; and we make decisions for the future. Through these aspects of mourning we are strengthened and we are consoled.

We will never fully solve the puzzle of Jared Loughner's actions. The horror brings us to our knees and our minds cry out for an explanation. In the midst of fear, anguish, and anger, accusations have been flying in all directions all week. But we know it is not that simple. We live in a complex world where personal and communal actions intertwine in ways too complicated to simply unwind the string to trace a simple thread of blame. There will be no simple answer.

At the same time, in the face of such an event, taking our mourning seriously calls us to consider the quality of our life together, even without Jared Loughner in the picture, to consider the issues that we have found ourselves struggling with this week in the aftermath of the tragedy. Three things I have noticed us discussing are: the rhetoric we use, violence involving guns, and mental health public policies.

Rhetoric.

Rhetoric matters. There is a multi-billion dollar marketing industry that gives evidence to this reality. How we say things, who says them, and when matters. In a culture whose entertainment even is increasingly violent, I suppose it's not surprising that much of our rhetoric is disrespectful and violent, but it's not good for us. I was distressed to hear our governor's response to a reporter regarding his decision to not participate in MLK events this weekend. It may be language he is comfortable with privately, but it is not language we value from his office. We all

say inappropriate things at times, but I hope he will be more careful about the words he chooses in the future. I hope he will think more about the common good. We are in this together. He is now the governor of all the people. I was glad to read in this morning's paper that he intends to meet with the NAACP.

Gun violence.

We are a culture that struggles with violence at all levels of our life together and guns play a role in that violence. Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed by a man using a gun. Since that time, according to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, more than a million people have been killed with guns in the United States, including suicides, accidental deaths and homicides.

We know the saying, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." People do kill people. But certain types of guns make it very easy for one person to kill 6 people and injure 13 more in just a minute. Why would we think it is appropriate to allow such semiautomatic weapons to be sold in our country? I understand some people think it is their personal right to own such a gun, but where is the common good in such a stance?

Mental Health Public Policies.

Do mentally ill people commit violence? Yes, just like other people do. But the vast majority of people suffering with mental health issues are not violent. Let us be careful not to draw too direct a line between Jared Loughner's mental illness diagnosis and his violent actions. This simply fosters a fear of the mentally ill.

In fact many studies show that the mentally ill are more likely to be a victim of violence than a perpetrator, which may have something to do with the fact that so many people struggling with mental illness these days end

up in jails, shelters, or simply living on the streets. They find themselves in very vulnerable places.

A number of years ago when public policy decisions were made to de-institutionalize people with mental illness the focus was on protecting the rights of these people to be regular citizens. However, the support in the community that was promised never fully materialized. Now, as states increasingly cut back on social service programs to balance their budgets, fewer and fewer people have access to mental health services. The waiting lists at public clinics gets longer and longer. Where is the common good in this reality?

As we mourn together we look honestly at our life together and the brokenness in the communal body. In so doing we trust in God's consolation and in God's strengthening us to take steps to make things better. We are called to take steps individually and collectively for a better world.

In today's Maine Sunday Telegram there is a section of writings from young people who live in Portland. They tell how the witness of Martin Luther King, Jr inspires them. I hope you will take the time to read them if you have access to this paper. Angelique, age 15, quotes King as saying, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

In faith let us courageously mourn so that we might confront the reality of what is lost, examine the brokenness in our life together, and then take the first step to heal our communal body, for God's sake.

