

... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Micah 6:1–8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

Matthew 5:1-12

Text: Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Introduction

I am not sure when the fad began, but I notice that fans of sports teams today will refer to themselves as a ‘nation’. ‘Leaf nation,’ for example, are fans of the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team. In a manner of speaking, the essence of Jesus’ preaching was to invite people to join a nation. Matthew tells us that “Jesus began to proclaim ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” A kingdom, a nation. Sports teams invite you to join their nation; Jesus invites us to enter the kingdom of heaven. And judging by the opening lines of Jesus’ sermon on the mount—what we call the beatitudes—Jesus clearly thinks he offers good news to anyone no matter the circumstances in which a person finds themselves. The kingdom, according to Jesus, offers blessing, happiness, good fortune.

1. Kate Bowler is, among other achievements, associate professor of American religious history at Duke University. Last October she published an essay titled [The Roof Always Caves In](#). The article begins with a description of a house she and her husband bought that had a shed in the backyard in which the roof was caving in. She tells the beautiful story about how her Mennonite family made the trek from Canada to North Carolina to rebuild this shed for them.

Kate writes, “That year the star of the Christmas letter was the shed, with a few addenda to make clear that it should last another twenty-five years before it caved in again on account of the limited warranty on the shingles. I thought about this often when I would sit in the yard, watching the same people show up to build me a fence because I had recently received a sudden Stage IV cancer diagnosis and there was nothing else to do. I wondered about the shed, which would almost certainly outlive me now, and how all my plans (oh, my beautiful plans) had been stripped down to the studs.”

“Even at my most durable,” continued Bowler, “it took so many people to build my life, prop it up, and maintain it. But once I was sick, I came to realize that the

most basic aspect of our shared humanity is our fragility. We all need shelter because we are soft and mushy and irritable in the elements—and we will need so much more than a bank loan because, sooner or later, we are left exposed. Time and chance, sayeth Ecclesiastes, happeneth to us all.”

Life is precarious, is it not? And Jesus is fully aware of our actuality. He knows illness litters lives with shards of broken dreams. His compassionate healing ministry tells you as much. But healing in this life is only temporary as welcome as it is. Even though Mary and Martha had the glad reunion with their brother Lazarus when Jesus raised him from the dead, he died a second time. And in the midst of life full of pain loss and injustice Jesus has the boldness and confidence to proclaim, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’

There is much debate among scholars about the identity of ‘the poor in spirit.’ In Luke’s gospel he has this saying as ‘blessed are the poor.’ Is Jesus thinking only of the economically disadvantaged or additionally of those afflicted with what we call mental illness? I would suggest to you that this saying encompasses human neediness of whatever kind, economic and otherwise. Lots of things crush people’s hopes and dreams. Illness, failed relationships, bereavement, economic downturn, crime, oppression, abuse, cruelty.

It is helpful to note the similar themes between Jesus’ beatitudes and the reading from the prophet Isaiah he offered one day in his hometown synagogue. He claimed the reading as his mission statement. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” If you go to the full text in Isaiah chapter 61 it also speaks of ‘comfort for all who mourn.’ And the mourning we need comfort to endure isn’t limited to losses in death.

Do you not find Jesus’ proclamation a bold assertion? Whatever you are facing in life you will find blessing in the kingdom of heaven, here and now. Do you believe him? Maybe you want to but you have had your hopes dashed often enough by the fragility or vagaries of life such that you are hesitant about promises that sound too good to be true. I notice, as I hear Jesus’ beatitudes afresh, that the blessings of the kingdom he proclaims are not subject to circumstances. There are many circumstances that can leave us thinking, “I guess, God doesn’t love me.” “He loves those other people who are healthy and wealthy and confident.”

The Apostle Paul wrote that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Note that he didn’t say that ‘all things are good’ as if to say you just have to look carefully enough to find some

silver lining. Rather, he knows that, in the kingdom, God is working good for his people in all the various circumstances of life. How does he know this? Because of who God is, as he goes on to say, He (God) who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? When circumstances whisper or scream the lie that God does not love us we only need to look to the cross and recall that Jesus went to hell and back for our redemption. The truth of his kingdom is that it is his steadfast love that endures forever, not our circumstance. The difficult circumstances of life are never that last word about you or me. For the believer, the last word about her is the kingdom word Jesus pronounced, Blessed!!

Countless believers will testify to the truth of the blessing Jesus proclaimed in the kingdom of heaven. They have been sustained in and through difficult circumstances and found that even though many in this world abandoned them, Jesus did not. They have come face to face with the fragility of life—or as Kate Bowler said, the roof always caves in—and found the peace that passes all understanding sustaining them in heart and mind, the peace only God can give. And he does! This isn't a cavalier attitude the believer has about life—whatever is is—it is the comfort and joy and courage that comes from the assurance our Lord gives in his kingdom that whatever happens here in this life is never the final word.

Here is how Kate Bowler ended her essay. (She had referenced Luke's gospel story of when some men tore open a roof to let down their paralysed friend to be healed by Jesus). "If I am very lucky, the shingles (on the shed) will last and the chemotherapy will hold and love will continue to do most of the work. I will go back to being someone who tallies up the inconvenient expiry dates of large appliances and count on birthdays and New Year's to set the clock of my mortality. I will be like the homeowner an hour after Jesus and the crowd have left, my floor littered with broken tiles and crumbled plaster. And I will look up, through the gaping hole to the blue, blue sky right from where I stand, no longer surprised by the fundamental Christian truth that the roof always, always, caves in."

Bowler isn't expressing pessimism as she speaks of the roof always caving in. She is confronting the reality of our fragile existence with the joy of faith in our Saviour's promise of eternal life. It is an expression of the blessing believer's experience in our Lord's assurance that the kingdom of heaven is theirs. His kingdom is layered over top of the kingdoms of this world such that the believer is not surprised that the kingdoms of this world do not last. Are you surprised that a disease overtakes you or that frailties increase? You don't have to like them but our joy is because that other kingdom, that is now ours by faith, endures forever.

2. Come with me in your imaginations and picture what is happening with Jesus and his disciples. Jesus had called some fishermen to follow him, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people,” he said. We noted last week that Jesus then takes these fishermen, now his followers, and schools them as disciples. They are learning what to preach and even how as they travel with Jesus from village to village in Galilee. Matthew, the gospel writer, would have us understand that this sermon on the mount is typical of our Lord’s preaching.

I invite you to take note that the first eight beatitudes address people using the third person pronoun, blessed are those. Also note that the ninth beatitude changes to the second person pronoun, blessed are you. You will also find that the rest of Jesus’ teaching in what follows in the fifth chapter of Matthew addresses hearers with the second person pronoun, ‘you’. This leads us to think that this ninth beatitude is a transition to what follows. A transition from, “Blessed are those who are persecuted” to “Blessed are you when people revile and persecute you.” It also leads us to regard the first eight beatitudes as a general proclamation to people, Jesus is fishing; in the ninth beatitude Jesus now turns to ‘you’, those who have decided to follow him.

You will also notice that these eight are bookended by the same promise, ‘for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ This indicates that these eight belong together as a kind of block. Listen again to the blessings Jesus promises people: comfort of heart, inheriting the earth, will be filled, will receive mercy, will see God, will be called the children of God, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And you can tell that Jesus thinks this is the best news you could possibly hear. Think about the kinds of promises we humans prefer. We readily follow the promise of wealth, prestige, power, health or the immediate fulfilling of our appetites. Are our sights set too low? Aren’t these the sorts of things the roof always caves in upon? And since we know this, wouldn’t it be wise to give Jesus a listen? It is easy to join a sports team’s nation; those of us who belong to that ‘blue and white’ nation know that the roof typically caves in. Our Lord promises a certain future! These blessings he promises never end.

These eight beatitudes can be grouped around two themes; the themes of the first and last beatitudes that promise ‘theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ Looking at the first four, you could understand that those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (things set right) could be gathered under the title, the poor in spirit. Further, in Greek, the word poor, mourn, meek, and hunger all begin with same Greek letter. There is an alliteration in what Jesus says so they

could be memorable. Like someone giving a talk organized it around ‘people, place, purpose.’

These last four could be gathered under the title of those persecuted for righteousness sake. The merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers are certainly those committed to following the way of God in the world—for righteousness sake. Following Jesus has never been popular in any era. Jesus wants people to know that his unpopularity in the world has nothing to do with the question of whether the kingdom of heaven is blessing or not. The world says righteousness is for the naïve; Jesus says, receive mercy. The world says that purity of heart is to miss out on life; Jesus says, you will see God. The world says the mighty determine what is right; Jesus says peacemakers will be called the children of God.

I read a recent article by research analyst Logan Albright titled [A 5th-Century Roman's Guide to Happiness in a World Full of Pain Loss and Injustice](#). Isn't this what Jesus' beatitudes offer, happiness in a world full of pain and loss? In speaking of meeting life's difficulties Albright concluded, “if we can attack these challenges with gratitude rather than resentment, with awe, joy and laughter rather than pessimism and grief, with a broader perspective than our own solipsism (the view that the self is the only reality), then we can not only survive, but flourish. We can work to build things up rather than tear them down. That's the way we'll get through the hard times.”

I have no quarrel with Albright that gratitude is better than resentment, that awe, joy, and laughter surely outshine pessimism and grief, that engaging with others a better way than living life all about me. The question Albright did not address is the source for our gratitude, awe, joy, laughter or desire to look outside ourselves. Are we somehow simply to find these things within ourselves?

How different is our Lord's promises of the kingdom of heaven. He is the source of all that he promises. And that makes all the difference.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, ... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.