

## Learning to Live in the Gray

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(MATTHEW 5:1-12 NRSV) *When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: <sup>3</sup>"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup>"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup>"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup>"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup>"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup>"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Perspective is everything. Perspective: the angle from which you view the world. A late colleague was struck down in the prime of life by MS. It left him confined to a wheel chair.

"It really does something to you to view the world from this level," he said. "Everybody looks down at you—talks to you like you were a child. I get hungry for somebody to get down at my level and talk to me, eyeball-to-eyeball."

"On the other hand," he continued, "you see a lot from down here. I spend most of my time at parties talking to children. I'm on their level, you see. They come up, look me in the eye, and ask honest questions only children ask. 'Why are you in that chair? Are you sick? Did you have an accident?'

Adults want to ask, but can't. It takes someone down on my level to ask such questions."

Maybe there's a bit of bitterness in his perspective. I think I'd feel bitter. But his point is well taken. I suspect most of us would prefer spending our lives on top, looking down, rather than on the bottom, looking up.

Barbara Brown-Taylor sums up The Beatitudes in the phrase, "Blessed are the upside-down."

The world believes that those who are strong, powerful, rich and happy are blessed. But Jesus said just the opposite—blessed are the poor, the hungry, the meek. I wonder if people started snickering about his third beatitude.

He turned conventional blessedness upside-down. Those we might call dead-beats, leeches, or burdens on society, Jesus calls blessed. God has always had a thing for those we regard as losers. So it's no wonder the church has never known exactly what to do with the Beatitudes. Some have attempted to turn them into new rules, even though they contain no "shoulds," or "oughts." Others have tried to explain them away as some sort of unrealistic idealism; okay for those who are really, really religious: like monks in a monastery.

In seminary preaching class, Dr. Craddock said, "The task of the biblical preacher is clear: it is to move into a text of scripture, taking his hearers with him; to move about in the text until its story becomes our story, and then to return to our time and place, bringing with us something of value for the living of our lives. And sometimes that works.

But it doesn't work with this text. This text doesn't connect with where we live. In fact, the verses that follow distance themselves even more, telling us to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, to pluck out our eye if we look lustfully. You can read the Log Cabin Democrat a long time and never come across advice like that! It's not practical "if you want to survive in the real world". Maybe you came here today for help with your life or for inspiration, but not this.

And yet, somehow Jesus feels he's addressing everyday life, that his advice is practical—what to do when someone offends you, when your marriage goes bad, when you feel lost (and who doesn't?). Maybe our problem with the Sermon on the Mount is not that it's not practical, but that it's difficult!

It begins to really sound like a sermon, and we don't like being "preached at." Webster defines *sermon* as "an annoying harangue." And the verb, to preach, is defined as "to give religious advice, especially in a tiresome manner." [*Try and overcome those expectations every Sunday!*]

But the Sermon on the Mount is not that kind of sermon—not that kind of preaching. The one who preached this sermon did so, not from a tenured faculty position, or a high marble pulpit. He preached in a field, out amongst the folk. He *preached* it, then he *lived* it. So this sermon is not more rules, but rather, a way—a way this preacher, Jesus, walked before he talked. //

Terry was a ministry intern, and I was the new senior minister and, therefore, his new mentor. We set a time for our first session, and his first words to me were, "You need to know up front that I'm pretty much a black and white person." He was true to his word: everything was black and white—right or wrong. There were no gray areas; and he was never in doubt about what—or who—was right or wrong.

There was no place to meet Terry, except on his turf and on his terms. And wherever he went he left a trail of stress and conflict. The congregation was conflicted because of his rigid moral absolutism. There may be nothing more stressful than the obsession with being perfect.

Many times, I pushed, "But, what if you're wrong?" and always—always—his response was, "But I'm not." Black or white; never gray.

But, life does not come to us neatly alphabetized or in order. Often it doesn't even have the decency to come at us one thing at a time! Life is lived in the

gray. I think the Beatitudes are about learning to live in the gray. I think the Beatitudes aim at giving us, not more rules or heavier moral burdens, but a picture of a whole new world, a new life we might never have known, apart from the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Here is a sermon that doesn't simply speak to where we are. It calls us to another place altogether.

"Blessed are you poor in spirit," begins the sermon. And aren't we all? Who here has enough spirit? "Blessed are you who mourn." "Blessed are the peacemakers." "Blessed are those who are persecuted..."

I remember when our kids were little packing the Dodge and driving to Yellowstone National Park.

"Are we there yet?"

"No, Dear, this is only Kansas."

They had to trust us. The only evidence they had was our stories that there really was a Yellowstone National Park and we were headed there. They had to trust. We're not there yet.

We've come a long way. Our society *is* more just in *many* ways. But we're not there yet. We're not in the kingdom of God yet. Jesus gives us glimpses, snapshots: Christians who refuse to seek vengeance, ordinary people who forgive extravagantly and serve sacrificially. The kingdom of God *is among us*. But, we're not there, yet.

That's what's wrong with my sermons. They touch base merely with where we are. Jesus' sermon takes us somewhere else; but, we're not there yet. We're not yet at the place to drive our stake and settle in. We're on the move. And he goes with us, giving us glimpses along the way, not of the way things are, now that God has come in Jesus, but of the way things will be in God's kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is not about being perfect. It's not even about being right. It's about being meek, and merciful. It's about taking the risk of loving. And it looks like Jesus, on the cross, forgiving those who were in process of crucifying him.

There is a significant difference between being perfect and being vulnerable. And nothing is more stressful than the obsessive need to be perfect. So, cut yourself a little slack. Cut each other a little slack.

Paul couldn't achieve it. He wrote to his friends in Rome (7:19): "The good that I want to do, I do not; and the evil that I don't want to do is precisely what I end up doing! If Paul couldn't achieve it, why would we stress out in the effort?"

When you get right down to it; I'd rather be blessed, than right.

Pray with me.