

### “Blessed Be”

A well-known story bears repeating. A preacher can't seem to take his eyes off of his wife during worship. Most of the time this didn't bother anyone, but now and then his wife would demurely blow a little kiss to him during the sermon. Some of the worshipers found this distracting, so the elders had a talk with him. “Oh, I understand,” said the preacher, “but it's really done in your best interests.” “How can it be in our best interests to have your wife demonstrating affection to you while we're trying to listen to the Word of God?” asked the elders. “It's not affection,” responded the minister, “it's a signal. When she blows a kiss, I remember the letters: K-I-S-S.” It stands for, ‘KeeP It Simple, Stupid.’”

I remembered that little story last week. I tried to relate the message Matthew was conveying by summarizing the geographic history of Israel in the names “Naphtali” and “Zebulun,” and how he was telling his people that lineage and territory are not what matters in the gospel—that in fact the light of Christ will shine from nations and people who are not of the historic Chosen People of God.

The point got lost in the details, unfortunately. Which is what happens when I write the sermon too early in the week. Nevertheless, the point remains. And if from time to time I forget to keep things simple, I must make my apologies in light of the fact that Matthew refuses to make his point outright. Unlike the Gospel of Mark, that just says what is to be said (with one minor exception where he writes himself into the narrative—14:52); unlike John, who tells the same story until we have a chance to understand it; unlike Luke, who has a simple political and ethical message about taking care of others; Matthew insists on being *subtle*. Subtlety means saying something, and meaning something more. It is a teacher's art, subtlety, and Matthew was a teacher. Like any good teacher, Matthew introduced information a way that opens the door to the learner's quest and imagination. Today, when education seems limited to making students good and obedient drones to the queen bee of economic growth, this subtlety is in danger of being lost. It is safe to say, I think, that true educators are frustrated by this loss. True teachers want their students to think; our society wants them to obey.

Matthew wasn't too concerned with obedience. He wanted his flock to think, and to think like those who follow Christ. You can get the idea by comparing today's gospel reading in Matthew, with the same story in Luke (6:20-26). In Luke, Jesus doesn't go up a mountain, but stays on a plain with the crowds. He addresses them directly: blessed are *you* who are poor, *you* who are hungry, *you* who weep. He likewise curses the privileged: *you* who are rich, *you* who have more than enough to eat, *you* who are happy at the expense of those who suffer. Luke keeps it

simple, and for those of us who have more than enough to sustain our needs, who do not have to watch most children die of hunger and disease, who feel smug and secure in our castles of heritage and history, Luke's Jesus makes immediate sense. And he scares us. He even makes us angry.

But Matthew represents a very different story, and does so in so subtle a way that we can easily miss the deeper point. Indeed, at first glance, there is something almost consoling about his version of the story... and since I despise a religion of consolation and comfort, I have always turned my back on this story where a gentle Jesus quietly pats his audience on the head and softens every term. It is not the poor who are blessed, but the poor in spirit, those who mourn will be comforted, the meek will inherit the earth, those who hunger and thirst will be blessed—but it is those who hunger for righteousness. It is the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers who are exalted, and no one is cursed with woe. It seems, at first glance, to be a milquetoast version of Luke's powerful narrative.

But look again. There is another difference, and the difference is critical. In Luke, Jesus addresses the crowd of poor, hungry, and fearful people. In Matthew, Jesus addresses a different audience. We read how Jesus saw the crowds. But in Matthew Jesus left them and went up the mountain. Only his disciples followed him. When Jesus spoke, he did not speak to the poor, the hungry, and the weeping; he spoke to those who, as his disciples, had enough to eat and who had learned and accepted the commission of God to serve the world. If you can picture the scene, it is as if he is addressing the disciples while looking over their heads at the crowds—perhaps in their thousands—who are not among the followers of Christ. Jesus does not say to his disciples, “You are blessed.” He tells them, “There, beyond you, are people you cannot see right now. They are beaten, poor in spirit, hungering for justice and peace and joy. They are children of God, and it is from them that the kingdom of God will be forged.”

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Lately I've become aware of something that I've been doing in worship for a long time. It's true, I do occasionally look at my long-suffering wife to see if she blows me a kiss. But more and more often, I find my eyes lifting to the back of our safe sanctuary. In my heart, I have become deeply aware of the thousands beyond these doors who are beaten, sorrowful, getting poorer and more desperate, even as I, in my middle-aged, try to figure out ways of making myself as safe as possible for the life that remains for me. I guess I'm waiting for them to come in here, where it's safe. Then I remember Jesus teaching the Beatitudes to his students. Never once did he say, “Stay safe, until the poor, the hungry and the weeping come to you.” We really aren't meant to play it safe, and follow Christ.

Staying safe is going to get a whole lot harder, too, friends. In a recent article in the Ottawa Citizen, a journalist named Bruce Garvey summarized a book

by Republican speechwriter and two-time presidential wannabe, Pat Buchanan, who also happens to be a darling of The Christian Coalition.\* Now those of you who know me know that, politically, I lean to the left, but also that I take the right wing seriously. I take them very seriously, especially since they keep calling themselves “Christian,” and assume authority for something called “Christian values.” Pat Buchanan is so far to the right that he makes Ronald Reagan look pink. What Buchanan has done in his latest book is to show how Caucasian populations in the West will shrink by 30% over the next 50 years due to our decreasing birthrate. In the meantime, of course, populations that have to have 8 or 10 children per family in order to survive will grow by a whopping 40% or so. In order to make sure there’s enough people to buy all the junk we produce in our economy, we will have to rely on immigration. There’s no surprise so far—this has been known for a long, long time. His conclusions, however, are disturbing. Buchanan states that such a trend will result in the death of the West; that our society will die as it becomes less white-skinned because to do so means inviting “our” enemies in. To correct this Buchanan supports isolation, in which all the non-white “those people” of the world are to take care of themselves, and “we” take care of ourselves. At times like these, I wish that the ancestors of North American First Nations people had taken the same attitude, let the Europeans take care of “themselves,” and allowed our ancestors to starve to death when we first came here. That would have solved a lot of problems, too.

Never mind that his statements would find applause in the Ku Klux Klan or in neo-Nazi organizations. It is impossible to understand them as Christian—and such can be said of The Christian Coalition. Especially so since Jesus himself looked over the heads of his chosen disciples, indicated the crowds of suffering and poor who were not among his followers, and said, “Look, there is where blessedness resides. There is where the kingdom of God will arise. There is where you have my work to do,” as if to say:

Go there, outside these doors. When you do, those thousands will be blessed.  
Blessed will be the mentally ill, who will have secure group homes,  
adequate care and medication.

Blessed will be those who mourn the death of someone who dies by their own hand, for there will be counselors and workers to help prevent the loss of someone else’s beloved.

Blessed are those who work for minimum wage, our working poor, for they will be able to support themselves and their families.

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\* *Ottawa Citizen*, Jan.13/02. The book is *The Death of the West*. Thanks to Eleanor Simmons.

Blessed are the wrongfully convicted, for justice will seek truth rather than winners and losers.

Blessed are those who live with integrity and honesty, for they will find prosperity and peace.

Blessed are the military peacemakers, for their job will be unnecessary.

I hope we understand this. In a few moments we will share in The Lord's Supper. Whatever we think we are doing when we take the body and blood of Christ, we are not doing it for ourselves any more than Jesus was talking about us when he said, "Blessed be..." When we share this food, we do so mindful of all who are without food and food for the spirit: the hungry, and those who hunger for justice; for the thirsty, and those who thirst for truth; for the poor, and the poor in spirit. If we do not take this bread, drink this cup, with our eyes cast far beyond our self-interest and comfort... then it is just bread and juice poured on the ground.

But if it strengthens our faith and lifts our gaze to the wonderful, beloved crowds of God's suffering—the masses of poor and alone and lonely, sick and sick at heart who are the objects of God's every blessing—if we are inspired to quite simply do justice, live with kindness, and walk humbly with our Lord, then we share in God's grace and reign...

...and blessed we shall be. Amen.