

Against Shame

Lake Street Church of Evanston

Rev. Michael Woolf

February 2, 2020

There's a story that I like very much in Christian history that takes place in the 3rd century. Christianity was decidedly not in vogue at the time, and so when a round of persecutions happened, they were always sure to start in Rome, which was also one of the nascent centers of power for the church as well. After they got rid of the bishop, they turned to the archdeacon, named Lawrence, and asked him to surrender all the treasure of the church, giving him 3 days. And so, he rounded up all the poor of the city, and when the emperor came back, he told them, "here truly are the treasures of the church. We are far richer than even the emperor." Of course, he was killed for that, but the story stands as one of the great surprise reveals – one of those fearless sort of stories that hagiography, that is the stories of the saints, are made of. That the treasure of the church should be those that have nothing of course makes no sense, and yet it is true. In religion, one should never let the truth get in the way of a good story.

And that spirit of reversal is also key to what are commonly referred to as the beatitudes. These are the series of sayings that usually in English begin with "blessed are the..." And the first thing you ought to notice is that none of these things are necessarily something that might make you feel blessed. They are clearly not the sorts of things that earn the typical definition of blessing. They do not earn money, fame, or even love. They are generally about suffering, but some are about pure actions like peacemaking or being pure of heart. And what are we to make about these beatitudes in the current day?

There's plenty of debate about what these represent – are they future reward promises, announcements of reversal, or announcements of present, hidden blessedness. All three have their merits in the text, but I tend to think that these are in keeping with the broad theme of reversal that we see throughout Jesus' ministry characterizes the reign of God. So, in some way they are that typical announcement – you think this person is cursed, in fact they are the beloved of God – that characterizes so much of Jesus' ministry in the radical acceptance of the other and those who are lowly. The beatitudes are a stunning rejection of an equation of wealth and happiness with God's favor, instead revealing that those who are suffering or who are lowly or who are seekers of justice are squarely located in the center of God's love.

But not everyone on this list is lowly – some are just dealing with death, some are just poor in spirit, some are just hungry for righteousness and justice in the present day, and the crux of what these texts are doing is fighting against shame. The ancient world primarily worked on a honor shame matrix of understanding, and that framework governs much of the context of scripture. One of the things that I learned in ministry that's been quoted too many places to actually figure out where it came from is that guilt is the

feeling that I've done something wrong, while shame is the feeling that I am something wrong.

These beatitudes strike out against shame. The feeling that I am wrong, that my experience is unique, that it is uniquely bad, that I am uniquely bad in my life. It says, "no, this stuff of human experiences, some of it is good, some of it is bad, and you are not wrong, you are not bad, you are beloved, and you are blessed." Jesus invites us to understand that suffering does not have to be accompanied by shame, that blessedness is not reserved for the few, charmed lives of whatever would have been on first century TV, but that it is available for us if we choose to pick it up.

It is a mistake to read the beatitudes without considering the disciples question in John 9: As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Notice how sure they are of the equation here – a bad thing is the result of a sin from someone or their parents, the only real question is who did something wrong, because there is a person in front of them who they believe IS something wrong. They don't ask, "why are some people born blind and others able see, Jesus?" They instead work right in the middle of a sort of first century prosperity gospel where blessings are given as rewards for faith, and punishments are meted out for sin in real time. Jesus' healing and subsequent blessing of the man begins with a simple statement: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." In other words, you seem to think that there's more order to the world than I do. There is nothing to be ashamed of – what a freeing and radical statement then and now.

Look, sometimes life deals us a bad hand. We are not as in control of our own destinies as we would like, we find ourselves suddenly in grief, we find out that we suffer from depression, or that our lives will not be as long as we thought – all those things are possible. They are not good things; they are bad things. But there is one truth here – you are not bad. The beatitudes tell us that you are the beloved of God, that nothing can separate you from that identity, and that the divine herself is fundamentally against shame.

Blessed Be.