

Epiphany 4A Matthew 5: 1-12 Micah 6: 1-8 1 Cor. 1: 18-31

While growing up I always admired friends who could do a hand-stand or stand on their heads. I just could not get my pudgy body to invert itself that way! I had a cousin who could walk up and down the block on his hands. I was very envious.

Therefore, I could only imagine what the world looked like upside down while in motion: grass hanging like a fringe, trees growing up and not down, my house ready to fall into some sky-blue pit.

You might be led to think that in such a world any thing was possible.

In a crazy kind of way Jesus was asking the crowd to stand on their heads when he taught them the Beatitudes, our gospel lesson today.

Jesus was taking their world and turning it upside down, so that those who were struggling for breath at the bottom of the human food chain suddenly found themselves very close to heaven, while those who thought they were at the top of the food chain found themselves flat on their backsides gazing up.

Once the people had assembled and he started to speak, what came out were these upside-down Beatitudes, a series of blessings he pronounced on those who were there.

The rhetorical form was a common form of expression. Beatitudes are pithy, two-part sayings that sum up the Good Life.

“Blessed are they whose 401k plans have done well, for their retirement will be secure.”

“Blessed are they who eat each day from the major food groups, for they shall keep their health.” “Blessed are the macho, for their enemies will fear them.”

It was not the form of what Jesus said that was shocking and life-inverting, it was the content!

They were getting ready for some jewels of wisdom, and out comes “Blessed are the poor in spirit...those who mourn...the meek...the merciful.”

Who was he putting on? There was nothing blessed or honorable or happy about those conditions. It was a substitution of bad things for good things. What could be blessed about hungering and thirsting and being reviled and persecuted? “Rejoice and be glad?”

Who would support that definition of the Good Life?

Jesus redefined the Good Life in nine short sentences in which blessedness was equated with the very things folks did their level best to avoid...poverty, hunger, grief, hatred. Nine portraits of kingdom citizens previously known as victims, dreamers, pushovers, and fools.

And Jesus even makes it stronger by tacking a reversal of fortune onto them: "Blessed are you who are poor," he said, "for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be filled."

These are the chosen ones, he said, the blessed ones who will get to see God face-to-face, not because they had some advanced copy of the winning rules, but because winning was the farthest thing from their minds.

From one angle of view these folks are certainly the losers. The forgiving who return again and again for a trouncing.

The peacemakers who step into the middle of a fist-fight and get clobbered from both sides.

The pure in heart who over and over again trust others and end up getting taken for a ride.

Jesus seems to be saying that these are God's favorites...the blessed...not the successful ones, but the ones who seem not to be able to compete and would not know worldly success if it rang their doorbell and handed them a big prize.

In our honest moments most of us are willing to admit that we do not know what to do with the Beatitudes. It may be that this kind of close-to-home reversal of what seems otherwise to be humanly normal, ends up really bothering us.

Or, for some of us, we have heard them for so long that they have lost their shock value. They may be most closely associated with what you put on needlepoint and hang in the hallway or over the piano.

Others of us hear them and immediately dive into guilt, worrying that we are not meek enough or pure enough or merciful enough.

After all, not many of us sell all and give the proceeds to the poor, but we do occasionally feel badly about all that we possess.

Or we decide to ignore this text and file it with all the other good Christian advice that no one we know personally has ever followed.

Please notice that Jesus is not giving advice here, as he certainly does in other gospel passages, which is hard to miss when He does! There are no 'shoulds' or 'oughts' or 'shalt nots.'

Nothing about 'do this and you will receive this.'

It is not advise at all...it is not even judgment. The Beatitudes do not tell us what to do. .

They tell us who we are, and more importantly, they tell us who Jesus is.

Jesus is describing the people who are right there before him: this is who they are, and this is what the future holds for them.

It is not the language of law, but the language of gospel, the language of hope and promise that the way things are now is not the way they will always be, and that those who find themselves at the back of the bus will be sitting in first class before the trip is through!

Which is to say that the power and impact of the Beatitudes has everything to do with who you are and where you are when you hear them.

They certainly sound different on top than they do from underneath. They sound different up front than they do in the back.

If you happen to be one of the hungry people, then what Jesus is saying sounds like pretty good news.

If you are one of the well-fed then it sounds like pretty bad news.

Up front with the religiously satisfied and self-assured, they sound pretty confrontational.

Where is your hunger, you well-fed Christians? Where is your spiritual poverty?

“Where are the bones of your soul showing through your clothes, and why aren’t your handkerchiefs soaked with tears?”

But in the back, way in the back, where they victims, the dreamers, the pushovers, and the fools are, the Beatitudes sound much different. “Dry your tears, poor little ones. The whole world belongs to you, though someone else holds the keys at the moment.”

They are the same words in every place, of course. The words do not change. They simply sound different to different ears. It is the ears that change, each of us hearing Jesus’ description of the Good Life through our own filters and in our own location, with our own degree of satisfaction, in our own social and economic class, on our own side of the train tracks.

I think it is fair to say that most of us hear them from the well-fed, the rich by global standards, the reasonably well-connected end of the spectrum. Many of us have worked hard in hopes that people would speak well of us, and when they do not, we take that as a sign that we still have more work to do.

I suppose that you can do anything you want to with the Beatitudes, and people always have done so.

Some have ignored them, some have admired them and walked away, some have used them to measure their own blessedness, and some have used them to declare a social revolution.

Perhaps the simplest thing to do with them is let to them stand you on your head so that you cannot see the world in the same way again, so that you cannot be sure anymore who are the winners and who are the losers, as one cannot be sure in Egypt at this moment. Upside down we begin to see God’s blessed ones in places it would never have occurred to us to look.

We begin to see that the poor in spirit, the meek and those who mourn are not just people we can help but people who can help us, if we will let them, and that their hunger and thirst for God are not empty places to be filled but appetites to be desired.

Upside down, we begin to see that the peacemakers are not naive dreamers but physicians, prescribing the tranquility of God, and that the meek are not fools and pushovers but ones who want to set the table for all, and a round one at that.

Upside down, we begin to see that those who have been bruised for their faith are not the sad ones but the happy ones because they have found something worth being bruised for, and that those who are merciful and are just handing out what they have already received in abundance.

Upside own, we can begin to sense what St. Paul was getting at when he said that “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong,...what is low and despised in the world,...to reduce to nothing things that are.”

The world looks strange and funny upside down, but just maybe that is just how it looks when you have got your feet planted in heaven.

Jesus did it all the time, and seemed to think we could do it too, and live differently because of it, honoring those whom he honored.

So, blessed are those who stand on their heads, for they shall see the world as God sees it, turned upside down by the one who really knows which way is up.