

“I Got a New Beatitude”

John 20:19-31

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Careful readers of the New Testament will observe that the Gospels of John and Mark do not have a set of beatitudes, those beloved sayings of Jesus we find in Matthew and Luke. You remember the original beatitudes: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you when people hate you” and so on. Mark’s Gospel is so brief there’s no space for such long winded teaching, and John has other purposes for his story, and so the original hearers of God’s word in the communities in which these beatitudanly-bereft Gospels were written did not have the benefit of such pithy and profound wisdom as the others. Maybe it doesn’t really matter that much since they didn’t have the Christmas story either and still turned out to be pretty good Christians, but we may imagine that they, like us, would have treasured those wonderfully portable sayings that remind us of the blessings God showers upon those whom society generally considers weak like those who are poor, who mourn, and who are meek, or those with decidedly anti-imperial values, as with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, pure in heart peacemakers, to use Matthew’s list. Those sayings, given as comfort or challenge to Jesus’ newly minted disciples in the sermon on the mount, paint a powerful picture of what it means to follow Jesus.

In our Gospel lesson tonight, the disciples are in a different place, not only physically, inside a house with locked doors instead of on a mountaintop, but also emotionally and spiritually. When they heard the Sermon on the Mount, they were in learning mode, soaking up like sponges all the wisdom Jesus had to offer. They were contemplating leaving behind everything to follow this guy and he was preparing them for the life they were going to be leading. Reading Luke's version of the beatitudes especially, you get the sense of someone who has already been cast out of the community for following Jesus, and so the beatitudes offered comfort to such a one that even though you have made the sacrifice of the right choice and suffered consequences, God is going to take care of everything and you'll get your reward, even if it wasn't what you originally had in mind. In the story at hand, these same disciples have been with Jesus for some time, experienced the providence of the Lord, and received blessings from being in his presence, but they are also now facing some tough decisions about what to do now that their fearless leader is no more. Sure, they've heard from some women that Jesus is back and better than ever, but they haven't seen it and we're not sure if they really believe it. And so the disciples are in a radically different place to hear the new beatitudes.

New beatitudes? Yes, even though they are sort hidden in the telling of the story, I think there is a post-resurrection set of beatitudes to be found in the Gospel of John, a set of sayings that are as important for the next phase of the disciples'

journey as the original beatitudes were for the first phase. Indeed, they are beatitudes for every generation of post-resurrection disciple who want to know what to do with the risen Lord, the question we need to ask every second Sunday of Easter, when the glow of the joy of Easter morning has faded and all the Easter eggs have been eaten.

And so, inspired by tonight's story in John, and because his Gospel is lacking beatitudes of its own, I thought I'd take the liberty of drafting a few based on tonight's story which lends itself so well to the task. Let us consider some of these the Post-Resurrection Beatitudes:

The first is this: "Blessed are those who experience the peace of God, for they will be able to listen." In the Bible, you very often find the first words out of the mouths of heavenly beings something designed to illicit calm, such as "Do not be afraid," or in Jesus' case, "Peace be with you." Now, along with peace being a nice thing to wish upon someone, this peace is pretty necessary since what it is really doing is addressing the shock mortals experience in the face of something outside the ordinary. Remember that angels, who frequently used such expressions, were fearsome creatures who looked nothing like those we find on greeting cards and television shows. And for the disciples, Jesus too would have been a fearsome creature for certainly none of them had ever seen the dead walk and enter into a locked house without so much as a knock. Even though they may have believed he was alive, I can't imagine they could ever really be ready to meet him face to face

having seen him placed in the tomb. And so Jesus, in his compassionate way, brings them his peace, the kind that passes all understanding, so that they may get over their shock and begin to hear what he has to tell them.

“Blessed are those who experience the peace of God, for they will be able to listen.” It’s a beatitude that is no less valid today than when Jesus met up with his disciples that night. You see, God still has a lot to tell us, both when we come to know that we are loved in spite of our sin, and when we are hungering and thirsting for righteousness and want to know how to do that better. But God knows that we can’t hear the revelation we need in an atmosphere of panic and chaos, but that we need peace to be able truly listen. It is when we are at peace that we are most open to God’s leading. And so this beatitude tells us that the peace of Jesus Christ is something to be treasured and practiced. I hope you have experienced that peace, and if you haven’t, let’s talk about that, but once we experience that peace we have to cooperate with it, we have to keep at least a few moments a day open to live in that peace so we can hear God speaking to us and guiding us, perhaps to hearing the next beatitude:

“Blessed are those who have been sent by God, for they shall make an incredible journey.” After Jesus calms the disciples down, he begins to deliver the news they can now hear: the journey is not over, it’s just beginning! “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” he tells them, giving them their apostolic charge.

There’s to be no moping around in a locked room; there a world that needs to hear

the beatitudes, and the parables, and the message of salvation and shalom. Jesus brought that message to them and now it's their job to take it everywhere. In addition to the witness of Scripture in the book of Acts which tells us something of their travels and adventures, the disciples took this charge seriously, even as far away as India if we are to believe the tradition of the Church. And do you know who it was who went all the way to India to proclaim the Gospel? Indeed it was the same Thomas we read about in this story, the Thomas who had a little trouble accepting the testimony of his friends without some physical proof.

We never know where God will send us, but we're called to follow wherever it may be. It will not always be as exotic as India, but I can guarantee it will be just as meaningful. Raising a child in the faith is both an incredible calling and journey in faith. Speaking the truth to power may lead you to prison, but there's ministry there too. Praying your way through the Psalms or the rest of the Bible will take you places you never dreamed possible. A few of us get the call to foreign mission service, but we all of us get the call to service wherever we are and wherever we go, it's an incredible journey. We are sent. Will we respond?

“Blessed are those who are breathed on by Christ, for they will receive the Holy Spirit.” Now, I'm not sure I'd want to have smelled in what Jesus was breathing out, considering he'd been in the grave for a while and, according to the Apostle's Creed, “descended into Hell,” but I'd have been happy to receive it. Despite what must have smelled like death warmed over, the disciples were not

sent out to proclaim the Gospel emptyhanded, but received the portable power of God, the Holy Spirit promised by Christ and now delivered. Having listened in peace to the charge they received to bring the message of life to the world, the disciples themselves receive the gift of life. Let us not overlook the significance of Jesus breathing on the disciples, for as you may remember, in both Greek and Hebrew, the words for wind, breath, and spirit are the same, and that the Hebrew understanding of life was that it was God-breathed, that human beings were animated by the divine breath/spirit, the same creative, life giving force that brooded across the face of the waters “in the beginning.”

Now, there are some Christian traditions which would like to make the gift of the Holy Spirit dependant on a rather narrow interpretation of its manifestations in our lives, those specifically outlined in the Apostle Paul’s writings. While admirable in taking seriously those gifts of the Spirit, such as prophecy or speaking in tongues, the net result of such a view, that one has really only received the Holy Spirit if one can demonstrate one of the specifically mentioned gifts, tends only to create and reinforce a spiritual pecking order that suggests that while all Christians are created equal, some are more equal than other. The traditions from which most of us come recognize that God has breathed the same life into each one of us; we are blessed with the Holy Spirit to guide us in our journeys using a wide variety of gifts, including compassion, listening, baking, parenting, or desktop publishing. You have the Holy Spirit; Jesus has breathed it upon all of us.

“Blessed are those who forgive the sins of others for they have experienced forgiveness.” Some might call it the Gospel according to Spiderman, the notion that “With great power comes great responsibility,” but I think Peter Parker’s Uncle Ben got it from this chapter of John when Jesus says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

With this statement, Jesus seems to be giving the disciples the keys to the kingdom, appointing them as gatekeepers of the faith. They get to decide who’s in and who’s out in Jesus absence. But as much as you can read this as the granting of authority, you can read this as a warning to the disciples to use this power wisely, to not let it go to their heads, and to exercise it in the way he has taught them, and as a reminder that because they have been forgiven, they should now know how to forgive, to teach forgiveness, to live forgiveness. Like Jesus taught them in the parable of the unforgiving servant, the one about the man who had his own debt forgiven by the king but failed to forgive the debt of another, those who have experienced forgiveness are called to embody it. Indeed, Jesus’ words about retaining the sins of others may also be a warning about harboring resentment, that we will bear the burden of holding on to what we cannot forgive. How is the world to which we are sent, equipped with the Holy Spirit, supposed to know about forgiveness, if we cannot forgive? “Blessed are those who forgive the sins of others for they have experienced forgiveness.” The proof is in the pudding.

Last but not least is the one that inspired the others, a variation on the blessing that John records: “Blessed are those who have not seen Christ for they shall follow in faith.” Jesus actually said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” but what he is referring to is the gift of faith that all but the original disciples received, for they were the only ones to actually see Jesus before he ascended to heaven. The rest of us are left to the the less tangible aspects of revelation, those that science can’t quite wrap its mind around, those that are verifiable only through the eyes of faith and hope, those that make the whole exercise of living the Christian life just a little bit more challenging than say, solving a murder as a Crime Scene Investigator. But believing on faith has all kinds of benefits we don’t always consider, benefits like not being shaken everytime some archeologist or pseudoarcheologist purports to make a new discovery that challenges the notions of the Christian story as we have received it. We believe not because we have actually seen Jesus, but because God has revealed to us a testimony even more powerful: the unquantifiable love of God, the inexpressible presence of the Holy Spirit, and the enduring truth of Jesus Christ whose presence and witness have inspired those with the eyes of faith to be at peace and listen to God, to be sent out to lay down their lives for their friends, to be led by an invisible Holy Spirit, to exemplify the forgiveness they have experienced, and to believe in something the world says is simply unbelievable. May we find ourselves as blest today as the disciples were that night when they

heard those post-resurrection beatitudes that gave them life and purpose when neither seemed all that evident. Amen.