

“Weird blessings”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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Of all the texts in the Bible, the Beatitudes are probably among the most famous and most beloved. We stitch their poetry on pillows, frame their words in calligraphy, hang their beauty on our walls. We like them; we're just not so keen on living them. They seem to set up ideals that are impossible to practice in real life. And let's be honest. These aren't exactly the blessings most of us would ask for: grief, meekness, hunger, persecution. Reading these you feel a bit like that kid on Christmas morning who is really hoping to get a game for his Xbox and instead discovers a hand-knit sweater from grandma with colorful reindeer. Um, thanks, but no thanks...

To look at these weird blessings anew, I've invited someone who was there at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to speak with us. As you can imagine, he's had to travel quite a distance to get here. I give you... Peter.

Oh, hello there. You probably know me as Peter, the leader of the 12 disciples, the rock upon which Jesus built his church. But long before I was Peter, I went by the name Simon. I was a fisherman like my father before me, and his father before him, and his father before him. I came home, each night, caked in mud and sweat, stinking of fish. And every morning, I got up before dawn to go back out onto the dark water, scraping out a living.

To most of the world, I was a nobody. I didn't have power, or money, or good looks; I wasn't an artist or a philosopher, a politician or a priest or a general. People saw me, and then they forgot me. Well, most people. You see, there was this man. He came walking on the shore where my brother and I were fishing. There was something different about him. His dress was poor; he didn't look any better off than me. But he walked with his head up. And he had this smile on his face. Almost like a man in love.

He called out to us; somehow knew our names. He said his name was Jesus and that he *needed* us. He said the world was changing, that a light would soon shine upon those who have lived in darkness. He said the kingdom of Heaven was upon us. And he wanted us to be a part of it. He said, "Come with me, and I will make you fishers of men."

My brother Andrew and I had no clue what we were getting into, but we dropped our nets, right there on the beach, and followed this stranger.

Now, I must say, the first time I heard Jesus say those Beatitudes, I thought he was off his rocker. I didn't know what he was talking about, and I didn't want half of it.

I admit I was skeptical. Jesus walked up that mountain like Moses himself. He spoke like a king giving his inaugural speech, describing what life in his kingdom would be like [cf. Douglas Hare].

I had heard inauguration speeches before. When Herod Antipas assumed power over Galilee, he made plenty of promises too. The same promises his dad, Herod the Great, had made. They promised to make our country powerful and wealthy. They promised jobs and a return to the greatness of our people. It sounded pretty good. Frankly, it sounded a heck of a lot better than Jesus' promises of being lowly and humble.

But in the end, despite gold buildings and tall walls, we were no closer to happiness. While the Herodian dynasty and the elites grew wealthier and more powerful, the rest of us got poorer, burdened by rising taxes. Riots and violence broke out in the streets of Jerusalem. A puppet for the foreign power of Rome, Herod established Rome's golden eagle at the entrance to the Temple. And frankly, Herod didn't seem any happier either. Consumed with what the people thought about him and desperate to hold onto his power, he murdered members of his own family, suppressed protests, and deployed secret police to ferret out dissenters and threats to his throne, including Jesus.

Herod the Great. Herod the Tyrant.

In the end, his blessings, his promises of happiness, turned out to be a fraud.

I wanted Jesus' blessings to be different, but it was hard to believe that, after so much grief, there could be comfort. It was hard to believe that peace was the solution to tyranny, that the meek would inherit the earth and the humble see God. But, in the beginning, Jesus didn't ask for belief. He just said, "Follow me." So that's what I did. I followed.

As Jesus began to heal the sick, even healing my own mother-in-law, I thought maybe I could have them both—the world's blessings, Herod's blessings, and Jesus'. Maybe—I thought—if you live out the Beatitudes, you will get prosperity and health.

But then Jesus died. He died a horrible, humiliating death. The other disciples scattered. There was no prosperity. And I faltered.

You probably know that story too. How I denied him. The pull of the world's blessings—safety, life itself—was too strong.

But not for my friend. Even when he was up on that cross, he continued to bless us, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus lived the Beatitudes till the very end.

But, of course, as you know, it wasn't the end. I got to see him—one last time before he went up into heaven. He gave me that same smile I had seen years ago on the shore and gave me one last weird blessing, saying, "Feed my sheep."

I don't think I really understood his blessings until that moment.

Those blessings weren't requirements for salvation, and they weren't a round-about way to achieve the world's blessings. They were gifts. Gifts of joy.

Like scales falling from my eyes, I realized that I had been living, unawares, Jesus' Beatitudes. I was living it when he invited me to the table—me, a smelly, unwanted fisherman. I was living it when he broke bread with me, when he got down on his knees and washed my feet, when he saw something in me—a rock, a power—that I had yet to see or believe in. I was living it when he called me by a new name: Peter, meaning rock. I was living it when my life took on a purpose I had never experienced before, when I helped him teach and heal and feed the hungry. And not just me, but so many others—people the world had discounted as expendable, poor people, sick people, immigrants, women, sex workers. All these people who should have been sad, with their heads bowed low, suddenly, in his presence, had been filled with joy. They had been... blessed.

The Beatitudes were Jesus' love letter to us, describing what we had yet to see in ourselves. He saw us happy, not because we had a lot of things or even because we lived a long life free of suffering, but because our lives had meaning.

He saw in us, not what we were but what we would become: disciples, relying on God, humbly working together, fired by love, pursuing justice and resisting evil, enduring persecution and grief because we had a dream of what the world could be. Because rather than cauterizing the wound, we allowed the love of our broken hearts to spill out into the world.

When Jesus said that the grieving would be comforted, he wasn't just talking about personal grief. He was talking about all the people who were weighed down under the grief of a violent, broken world. He was talking about the Jews who grieved the daily humiliations and subjugations of the Roman Empire and of their own leaders. He was talking about the grief you feel for seeing your neighbor crippled by poverty. When Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn," he was saying, "Blessed are those who have not resigned themselves to the status quo, who have not hardened their hearts to the plight of their neighbor, who have resisted cynicism, and who turn their wailing into a cry for a better world."

I'm not going to say receiving Jesus' gift was easy. He never said it would be. I myself ended up on a cross, much like Jesus'. I knew awful pain. Yet, through it all I lived a joyful life. I got to be a part of the birth of the church. I got to proclaim the good news. I got to see God. Because of Jesus' Beatitudes, my life mattered.

If you doubt that, think on this: the stories of history tend to remember only the lives of kings and conquerors, and not those of lowly fishermen. Yet, here I stand - the Rock of the Church. Because, in the kingdom of Heaven, a different story is told. I was always a citizen of that kingdom; I just didn't know it until Jesus blessed me and invited me home.

Many years after my time, an American poet by the name of Robert Frost penned these words:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And it has made all the difference.*

**Amen.**