

Lenten Sermon Series 2009

*The Beatitudes 7: Blessed Are You*

John 20:1-18

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

Easter Vigil

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During Lent this year we have studied the Christian training program known as the Beatitudes. For all their poetry, Christians throughout history have debated whether anyone can actually live by the Beatitudes, but in this series we've seen that theologian G.K. Chesterton was right when he said it's not that the Christian ideal has been tried and found wanting, rather it has been found difficult and left untried.

The Beatitudes are carefully designed to lead us through a sort of retraining program in which what appears as foolishness in the world is stood on its head to become God's wisdom. We've seen how Jesus himself exemplifies all of the qualities in the Beatitudes, starting with poverty of spirit, an acknowledgment of our absolute dependence on God, and leading up to our purpose as Christians to be peacemakers. But that task of peacemaking is not the end. There is one final Beatitude, but it is different from the ones that have gone before. The others have addressed qualities or attitudes that we are called to have. This one, however, speaks of how others will react to us when we have been remade into the people God has called us to be. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." And as if to really drive the point home, Jesus goes on. "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

The thing is, though, that there's a temptation here. None of the other Beatitudes are particularly tempting: mourning, poor in spirit, hunger and thirst? No, thank you! But with this last one, the thing is that people love to think they are persecuted. And it's even worse when we think we're being good and holy and righteous. I think of a planned ad campaign I heard about this week, as states like Vermont and Iowa move closer to recognizing gay marriage. It's an ad campaign claiming that gay marriage is a violation of the civil rights of those who oppose gay marriage! Or a bumper sticker I saw on a truck this past week that read, "If you don't believe in Jesus, go to hell!" How we love to believe that we are being persecuted because we are so righteous! Yet that attitude violates beatitude #4 about those who hunger and thirst for righteousness yet do not possess it. How dearly we like to see those who oppose us as our enemies! Yet that violates #7, blessed are the peacemakers. How we would love to show our opponents no mercy! But oops, that's #5 gone.

This is certainly not the kind of persecution Jesus is talking about here, and we need to guard against that kind of hubris, lest we take what is supposed to be a blessing and turn it into a curse. Remember, the purpose of all this is to be right with God and right with one another. If we're going around picking fights with people over Jesus, then we haven't been paying attention.

Throughout this series we've been looking to Jesus as our example, and certainly Holy Week demonstrates how Jesus was persecuted for righteousness' sake. But our story today about Mary Magdalene also illustrates both the temptation and the true meaning of the final beatitude. After the events of Maundy Thursday, all of Jesus' followers were afraid that they would suffer the same persecution that Jesus did. The men were all hiding from the authorities, hoping not to get arrested themselves. The women alone accompanied Jesus to the bitter end. They were there at the cross, and they come back now early in the morning after the Sabbath to anoint Jesus' body. Yet behold, they find the stone of the tomb rolled away, and

Jesus' body taken. Desecration! Robbery of the most heinous kind! As if murdering Jesus wasn't bad enough, now someone has violated his tomb. How dare they! How dare they impinge upon Mary's right to mourn Jesus! How dare they be so cruel! How dare they do this to her!

Mary doesn't actually say this, but can you hear it as a possibility? She weeps, "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him." Not, "My Lord is missing" or "Where is my Lord?" or even, "What has happened?" Rather she lays the blame at the feet of this mysterious, malicious "they." The fact that she doesn't know who "they" might be does not matter. Someone here is guilty of a crime. Someone here is the enemy. Heaven knows such a reaction is understandable. Could any of us blame her for thinking that way? Yet that is not what the Beatitudes call us to.

The angels ask, "Why are you crying?" The answer might seem obvious, but really, what ulterior motives might she have had? Might she be wanting to show how devoted and righteous she was by anointing Jesus' body? To show up the men who were in hiding? Jesus calls us to take a hard look at ourselves, to be honest about what dark impulses might lie under our apparently good deeds.

In the other gospels, the angel next says something that turns Mary's perception completely upside down, that what she took to be a crime is in fact the greatest blessing of them all. "He is not here; he has risen!" It's a reminder that even what appears to be the absolute worst thing may in fact be a sign of blessing.

I'm not saying that we should embrace suffering and persecution, like the misguided ministers who tell abused spouses that they should endure their suffering like Jesus did. We shouldn't just grin and bear it. We need to speak out against suffering and persecution, and when people revile us and speak evil falsely against ourselves and others. We're not called to put up with these things, because they are signs that we are not right with God or one another. But we are called to remember the lessons of the Beatitudes, even when we suffer. That as #7 says, Christians have no enemies. As #5 says, we are called to mercy. That as #4 says, we do not possess righteousness. As #1 says, we are dependent on God. But #8 assures us that God will indeed deliver us. Rejoice and be glad! For if we have been remade into the image of the Beatitudes, then we will not let our suffering turn into bitterness and hatred. Rather that will be the moment when we remember all that God has in store for us, the very kingdom of heaven itself.

Those who are persecuted are blessed not because they are more holy or righteous than anyone else. They are blessed because their labors will not be in vain. In Calcutta, there is a children's home that is run by the Sisters of Charity, the order that Mother Theresa founded. Printed on the wall are the following words, an illustration of what the Beatitudes are all about:

People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you help them.

Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

If we can do that, then the kingdom of heaven is indeed ours.