

Blessed Be

February 2, 2020

Are you familiar with the term, “bent out of shape?” We usually use this term to talk about someone being angry or frustrated. So-and-so was “bent out of shape” because they didn’t get the promotion, or they were “bent out of shape” because their neighbors never cut their lawn. In the nuances of the phrase, there’s a hint of the irrational. After all, if a tire or a nail is bent out of shape, it’s no longer useful. Or, maybe it isn’t irrational, but a hint of judgment.

I’d like you to throw that common understanding of “bent out of shape” out the window this morning, and instead, think of being “bent out of shape” as something positive. Our Gospel passage today is the beginning of what is often called the Sermon on the Mount, a passage in the Gospel of Matthew that summarizes and kicks off Jesus’ ministry. One of the interesting distinctions of the Gospel of Matthew is that this author portrays Jesus as the new Moses. For our purposes today, what is interesting about that is the parallel of both figures going up a mountain, and then bringing a radical new teaching to the people. We’ll talk more next week about that word “radical,” but for now, suffice to say that it doesn’t connote Che Gueverra or a hippie draft dodger, but rather the true meaning of the word: root or core.

Both Moses and Jesus go up a mountain, and then proclaim a radical teaching about God’s ways. In Moses’ time, the 10 Commandments were radical because they were how God created a unified people out of a wandering band of escaped slaves. The 10 Commandments were radical, were the root of God’s work, because they set the foundation for how to be a community of the people of God. So, when Matthew tells his Jewish audience that after 40 days wandering in the desert, Jesus goes up a mountain and then begins to teach, their ears are expecting a radical teaching. They’re expecting the root, the core of what God has to say through Jesus, and in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not disappoint. He begins with our passage from today, a series of phrases, “Blessed are the ____, they will be ____.” This is an ancient Jewish prayer form. Blessed are the honest, their word is their bond. Blessed are the kind, people will seek their company. Blessed are the generous, their kindness will come back to them.

But in Jesus’ beatitudes, he doesn’t lift up the people that we normally think of as being blessed. He doesn’t lift up the kind or the honest or the generous. He doesn’t name the wise or the intelligent. And he surely doesn’t proclaim “blessed are those who prosper, for that will be proof of God’s favor.”

No, when Jesus has his “Moses moment,” this chance to share the root of God’s teaching, he lifts up the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure at heart, the peacemakers. He lifts up people who aren’t usually seen as being blessed. In fact, I’d suggest that he names people who we might say are “bent out of shape,” those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are persecuted for righteousness.

A quick aside here, I know I'm offering a number of root words here today, but I hope they really do help to wrap our arms around these concepts. The word that is translated here as righteousness has the same root as the word "to serve." Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to serve others, or even better, to do right by others. Blessed are those who are persecuted for doing right by others.

Jesus' beatitudes don't lift up people that we would normally look upon as being blessed. We don't think of grieving as a blessing. It's hard and sad and lonely and heartbreaking. Being persecuted, especially when you're doing what is right, is irksome at least, and often scary and frustrating and disorienting. There's an important nuance here. Jesus doesn't say that it IS a blessing to be poor in spirit or persecuted for doing right by others, he says that you are blessed WHEN you do these things. He isn't encouraging us to seek out mourning, but rather, when we find ourselves in the midst of those difficult, dark times, there will be grace to be found.

In the 10 Commandments, Moses gives the Israelites a foundation of behavior which will gel them together as a people. In the Beatitudes, Jesus talks about what our relationship is with the divine when we behave well and life still doesn't turn out the way we planned. When life bends us out of shape.

Early on today in these remarks, I used the image of a tire rim or nail, that when they're bent out of shape we understand them to be useless, no good anymore. What Jesus is saying in the Beatitudes is, "When you're bent out of shape, when you feel useless, or when the world questions your usefulness, God is right there, crafting blessing and grace." Don't be fooled by the outward signs of prosperity and blessing; it is when you are bent out of shape that God can reshape you into something more kingdom shaped, more God shaped, more relationship shaped, and less ego shaped, less self aggrandizing and more about God's root vision of love for all. It is when we are bent out of shape that we are malleable into being more compassionate and merciful and gracious.

Friends, I'm so very conscious that for many, it has already been a long year. We have any number of people who are struggling, who are mourning, who are meek and merciful. Anyone with ears to hear knows that it is a rough era to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be a peacemaker, to be pure in heart. And so I'd like to suggest that the church of God has a profound role to play. Lots of wonderful people are sick, and dying, and poor in spirit. Society seems to be not just on a highway to hell, but an Autobahn. We are, collectively, bent out of shape. And what Jesus did when he encountered the same dynamics in his era, is he proclaimed blessing. He reminded people that they are loved, and worthy, and precious. He called out those who had lost hope, and he reminded them that God wasn't finished with them yet.

To quote two of the mottos of the United Church of Christ, "God is still speaking," and "Never put a period where God has placed a comma." We, as believers in the Still Speaking God, have a responsibility to proclaim beatitude, to beatify, if you will. Blessed are you who are awaiting test results, your waiting will make you more empathetic to others. Blessed are you, on both sides of the aisle, who are caught up in the

impeachment trial, your hunger and thirst for righteousness will shape the future.
Blessed are you who are struggling to get by, God will not forsake you, we promise.

Proclaim blessing. Recognize where people are bent out of shape, and let them know that there is hope. As Jeff read from the prophet Micah today, “Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.” The people of God were bent out of shape when Micah proclaimed this to them. Their society was exceedingly greedy, neglecting the needs of the poor and voiceless, and the prophet of God told them to re-shape society with justice, kindness, and humility.

What I’d like to end with today is a modern day riff on the Beatitudes written by enfleshed, a collective of pastors whose writing I find particularly poetic. When I’m finished reading their beatitudes, I invite you to call out others who this world would understand to be bent out of shape, but whose circumstances we trust God can shape into a blessing. Of course, these are categories of people — please do not call out anyone by name as being bent out of shape!

Now, hear these beatitudes by enfleshed:

blessed are you who are raging.
blessed are you who are mourning.
blessed are you who feel numb.
blessed are you who feel sick. and tired. and sick and tired.
blessed are you who refuse to turn away.
blessed are you who need to turn away.
blessed are you who keep breathing deep.
blessed are you who are tending to your own needs.
blessed are you who are tending to the needs of another.
blessed are you who have been calling.
blessed are you who have been organizing.
blessed are you who have been testifying.
blessed are you who have been hearing.
blessed are you who have been resisting.
blessed are you who feel broken open beyond repair.
blessed are you who are raw beyond words.
blessed are you who are working hotlines and crisis care centers and bearing witness to
the forces of violence and trauma unleashed and unloosed.
blessed are you who are marching.
blessed are you who are weeping.
blessed are you who preach and know that divinity resides in despised, abused, violated
flesh.
blessed are you who know deep in your bones that you are good, and beautiful, and
beloved, and sacred, and worthy, and believed, and held, and capable of healing
beyond your wildest imagination.

blessed are you who remind others they are good, and beautiful, and beloved, and sacred,
and worthy, and believed, and held, and capable of healing beyond their wildest
imagination.

blessed are we when we dare to dream of a world without violence, without white
supremacy, without misogyny, without brutality, without oppression and
domination and poverty and greed.

blessed are we when we stay tender.

blessed are we when we stay fierce.

blessed are we when we dare to imagine repair, and transformation.

blessed are we when we labor together to make it so.

Who else is the church called to proclaim as blessed?

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Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12
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