

## **“The Importance of Commas”**

**Matthew 5:1-12**

**All Saints**

**October 31, 2021**

**Rev. Dr. Andrew Kinsey**

**“Blessed are you....”**

### **Prayer of Preparation**

In the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray come and abide with us. Amen.

### **Message**

All Saints is a special day in the life of the church. We take time to remember and give thanks for those whose lives have touched us. We call them ‘saints’ because they lived out the gospel: they were themselves ‘gifts’ to the world.

When I read the list of names today, I can see how this congregation has had ‘saints’ who have given in different ways, people like Jim Crane with the city forest here in Franklin, Jerry Joe Clark with scouting ministries, and Georgianna Tressler with the United Methodist Women. All of them made an impact. They bore witness to Christ in their own unique ways. They were faithful.

In fact, there is an old question that I think is still a good one to ask on days like today. It goes something like this: ‘If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?’ What would we discover?<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the answer depends on what you think being a Christian means. I am not sure Christians even agree on the answer. For example, some Christians might say, ‘God comes to us when we are on our last dime, when we have nothing and no one to turn to.’ Being a Christian means saying, ‘I am lost. And yet, I want to be at home with God and with those whose pain is no secret.’

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Sam Wells for several insights into this sermon on the Beatitudes: ‘Dwelling in the Comma’ at Duke Divinity School on January 20, 2011.

Here, we can understand Jesus' life as shaped around people whose tears have flowed so long, they have run dry, or around those who have screamed out loud so long that they feel they cannot go on any longer. They have a simple prayer that goes something like this: 'Lord, give me strength to get through the day.' It is one way we might understand what it means to be a Christian as it speaks of the compassion of God.

But others might answer the question another way: other folks might say that 'God wants us to be holy, and being a Christian, or a saint, means letting the Spirit shape us in ways of righteousness and purity.' It tends to ask questions like, 'Have you kept the Ten Commandments? Have you made room in your life for personal devotion, public worship, charitable giving, and civic service?' It is a good answer as it speaks of the goodness of God.

But still a third group might have another answer: this group may say that 'God wants us to stand up for justice, to advocate for the disadvantaged, to turn words into actions.' Being a Christian is about actively seeking to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. It asks, 'Have you let your faith propel you into courageous deeds?' This group speaks of the justice of God.

I wonder if you recognize yourself in any of these three answers. I wonder if you were profoundly shaped as a child or later in life to believe that one of these was right and the others were dubious or wrong.

For years, if not centuries, the church has been split around these different answers to this basic question, 'What does it look like to be a Christian, or a saint?' Which is it? Can we really settle for just one of the three?

### **Sermon on the Mount**

The place to go for an answer to this question is to Chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus, like Moses before him, goes up on a mountain and utters the most significant words of his life. We call it the Sermon on the Mount, with the Beatitudes as the most succinct account of what it means to be a Christian.

But how do these precious words answer our question? What, according to the Beatitudes, does it look like to be a Christian?

There are nine Beatitudes, and I would like to work through them with you in groups of three. For instance, in the first group of three, we read, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, and blessed are the meek.’

In this group, Jesus is teaching that the gospel begins when you are desperate. The gospel begins when you ask questions like ‘Am I miserable? Is my life in pieces? Are my plans for my career, my marriage, my degree, my health in ruins? If so, the good news is that you’re right where the gospel takes root.’

But there’s also a message here for you as well if you’re bored, disillusioned, jaded, or non-committed, and you want to discover what Christianity is about. The message here is that ‘If you want to know more about Jesus, go hang out with someone whose stomach is empty, or whose head is hurting, or whose spirit is crushed, or whose heart is heavy.’ The reason for doing so is because that’s where Jesus starts.

But it’s also more subtle than just that. Look at the way Jesus expounds on three kinds of misery. The first is poor in spirit. What does that mean? It means to know we have done something wrong, maybe a lot of things wrong, maybe something very wrong, perhaps something terrible; and then what happens is we lose confidence; our pride makes us ashamed to show our face, or frightened to reveal our true selves to anyone, resentful of people’s harsh standards and judgmental attitudes. In addition, if we are poor in spirit, we may not regret what we have done, or what we are doing. We then segregate ourselves from regular company. We’re poor in spirit.

But then there are those who mourn. There are those who grieve because mortality and fragility, and maybe sheer bad luck, have deprived them of something or someone who was their reason for living, who made their heart sing. Mourning means suffering through no fault other than allowing our lives to be deeply invested in the life of someone else. Mourning means loving and losing. Those who mourn or grieve are those who suffer because they have loved. Think about how pronounced mourning has been over the last eighteen months: Blessed are those who mourn.

And then there’s the meek. The meek are those who suffer through the fault of somebody else. The meek are the disadvantaged, the discriminated against, the faceless statistic, the dispossessed. Blessed are the meek, Jesus says.

In these first three beatitudes, Jesus is telling us something profound about the gospel: he is saying that the gospel begins in the gutter regardless of whether someone put you there, or whether it is bad luck, or you put yourself there. Here, Jesus echoes the first of our three answers: being a Christian, or a saint, means dwelling in the hurt places, in the suffering places of our tears.

## **Group Number Two**

But we still have six more Beatitudes to go. This is what the next Beatitudes say: ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, and blessed are the pure in heart.’

Imagine having such a longing, such an ache and yearning to imitate God, that it feels like hunger and thirst. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who are so focused on God, so conscious of their shortcomings before God, but also so active in their steps to walk in God’s ways and share God’s heart, that this desire becomes their meat and drink, their daily sustenance. Being a Christian, then, is about being like Jesus, thinking like him, acting like him, loving like him, living like him. That’s what it means to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

But then there’s the merciful. This is the central Beatitude of the nine. If righteousness is our regard for God, mercy is our attitude to one another. Later Jesus says, ‘Treat others the way you want them to treat you.’ Here Jesus says, ‘Treat others the way God has already treated you.’ How would you like God to treat you on judgment day? Treat others that way today. Demonstrate to others the mercy you beg God for. Recognize God in others, and God will recognize himself in you.

And then we come to ‘Blessed are the pure in heart.’ That is to say, the thirsting for righteousness is about God, the being merciful is about others, and being pure in heart is about ourselves. One great theologian said, ‘Purity of heart is to will one thing.’

In fact, I’m sure you’ve all been told many times that to hold down a responsible job you need to distinguish between the urgent and the important, and

to judge which things are urgent but not important, which things are important but not urgent, and which things are neither urgent nor important.

Well, purity of heart is about knowing as a matter of habit which things are important. Not fashionable, not popular, not effective, not lucrative, not eye-catching, not relaxing, not clever, not witty, not dramatic, not necessarily urgent: but important; and then, in a crisis, when everyone else has lost their senses (which seems to be happening more lately), you'll be able to see the one thing that no one else is able to see, all because you never stopped looking at it in the first place.

In this part of the Beatitudes, Jesus echoes the second of our three answers at the beginning of our sermon: the issue is not about you changing the world; rather, it's about letting God change you.

### **The Third Group**

But there's more. The last three Beatitudes are about what happens to us when we follow the logic of Jesus' life and teaching – when we put feet on the gospel. We start with 'Blessed are the peacemakers.' To be a peacemaker you need understand the first group of Beatitudes – how sin and unfairness and suffering lead to conflicts. But you also need to embody the second group of Beatitudes, because peacemaking needs mercy; it needs a healthy perspective, and it needs God. How do you become a peacemaker? Well, here's a question you can ask yourself when you get out of bed each morning: 'How am I going to be a reconciling presence in the life of my neighbor?'

Then there's the last two. 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake and... blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.' In these Beatitudes, Jesus is talking about those who love God so much that they don't care who knows, or how much it costs, or how unpopular it makes them, or how much it endangers their lives. This is a faith that follows through the implications of Christ's love to the very end, a faith that never tires, even in the face of hostility, even in the face of danger. Even in the face of death.

### **The Cross**

But note something. Note how Jesus doesn't choose between our three answers at the beginning of the sermon. He doesn't pick one over the other, so why do we? Is it because we want Jesus, but we don't want the cross?

Because, you see, Jesus doesn't just speak the gospel. He lives it. In fact, the Beatitudes are nothing less than the story of Jesus. Every single one of them anticipates a moment on Jesus' journey to the cross. He's poor in spirit when he takes on the sin of the whole world. He mourns when his heart is heavy in Gethsemane. He's meek when he's falsely accused. He thirsts on the cross when he is dying. He's merciful when he says, 'Father, forgive them...' He's pure in heart when he says, 'Not my will but your will.' He's a peacemaker when he tells Peter to put down his sword. He's persecuted and reviled by the priests, scribes, soldiers, and religious bystanders at every moment in the passion story. The Beatitudes are Jesus' autobiography.

Indeed, the Beatitudes are Jesus saying, 'This is who I am – and this is how to be like me – this is how *to be* me, to be my body in the world.' To be a Christian, to be a saint, is to live the Beatitudes.

### **The Importance of Commas**

But note something else very important: every Beatitude comes in three parts. The first part is a description of the cross. It's poor, it's thirsty, it's meek, it's merciful, it's persecuted. Then there's the last part, which is a description of the resurrection; each Beatitude has a promise: 'They will be comforted... they will inherit the earth... they will be filled... they will receive mercy... they will be called children of God... theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' The Beatitudes are essentially a description of Jesus in his cross and resurrection.

But there is more: Note the punctuation. Between the cross and the resurrection lies a comma. Every Beatitude has a comma in the middle. That comma is a kind of valley between the suffering of the cross and the wonder of the resurrection.

I want you to think about that comma for a moment, not so much as punctuation, but as that place in your life where you meet God. That comma is your life as a Christian. To be Christian or a saint is to dwell in that comma that

lies between the first and second half of each Beatitude. That comma is where you find Jesus.

So what does it look like to be a Christian? Jesus is saying, the people who know the answer to that question are those who are closest to the cross. The closer you get to Jesus' cross, the closer you get to the resurrection. If you're one of those people, happy are you. If you're not one of those people, start hanging around with those who are. That's what it means to live in the comma. Jesus is the place where cross and resurrection meet. My question to you is, are you?

I believe that it's time to stop limiting ourselves to just one third of the gospel. It's time to live the whole thing. It's time to dwell in the comma, as the place where we meet Jesus, as the place where we find blessing and live the blessed life...a blessed and saintly life indeed. Amen.