



LESSONS IN LIVING

The Beatitudes as a Revolutionary Manifesto

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1-11 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

This week I was thinking back to the time when we were building this church building. I used to come up here at night, before the walls or roof had been finished, and I'd sit and look at the stars, and try to guess what would happen here. Of course, I couldn't imagine some of the things, like the church congregation splitting, or all our troubles with the Presbytery; you wouldn't think of things like that (laughter). But a lot of good things have happened here, the growth of the ministry and the many memories that accompany it.

When I was going through some things this week, I ran across a little rubber stamp. It has a heart on it, and it was the first identity of St. Andrew's. Very few of you will probably remember this, but we were so small when we got started. When I applied to this church, the Presbytery called and said, "Don't go there. It's a dying church. They've been dying for some years now." That certainly isn't the vision you want for a church that you're considering going to (laughter) and it was a pretty bad situation. When I was applying for the job, I knew it wasn't as good as they were saying, because they talked about how good the economics were, and then one of the last phrases on the church form said, "And we've replaced all the lights." (laughter) You have to figure that times are pretty hard when you're bragging on having replaced light bulbs.

The first identity of the church was, "The Little Church with the Big Heart." We were trying to redefine the smallness as not a negative. We could still be very inclusive and love one another. That was really Chapter One in lots of ways for St. Andrew's. Then as we grew in a lot of different ways, we realized that we needed to be inclusive in ways that we had not imagined, and so we became "Open Minds, Open Hearts, Open Hands." This was before the Methodist Church stole it from us. (laughter) But I also have to admit that I stole it from Thomas Keating, so, you know, who's counting when it comes to crime in the church. (laughter)

Now we're at a point where we need to think about Chapter Three. We're beginning to think strategically about the future. It's wonderful to be a loving community, and we haven't lost that, and we've grown to be open and inclusive, but those really aren't positive directions for the future. They were born out of struggle and difficulty, and to set a positive course into the future is our next task. I don't know what the specifics of that are going to be; that will have to come out of this community, but one of the things that I will advocate for is that it be centered on the Sermon on the Mount...that the radical, universal love of Jesus be at the core.

Now that may not *sound* radical, but that is a very rare idea inside the church. The church historically has found every way to silence the Sermon on the Mount. *Don't judge*; we got rid of that one, didn't we? (laughter) *Share everything; take the lowest place, call no one in the church on earth "father," or "mother"*...we skirted the whole teaching. Nobody has been better at silencing these teachings than the reformed churches. They have figured out ways to turn Christianity into a religion *about* Jesus. Jesus might as well have come as a mime, because we erase the teachings themselves and make it *about* Jesus instead of about the *teachings*.

Once you've done that, you can do anything you want with it. There's a book out now called, "The Jesus Manifesto." That's a great title. But I was looking at it, and it's the typical traditional church stuff. It says that what you should have is "the living Christ in your heart." Now that's a beautiful thought, but doesn't that give you a lot of latitude in what you can do? — having your invisible friend inside of you? "Well, Jesus, should I take this job or not? It pays eighty thousand dollars, you know...well, OK. I'll do it." (laughter) And isn't it amazing that when you have that kind of Christology, how you get all your wishes granted by divine edict? But what if we put the Sermon on the Mount into our Christology and let our founder speak and say, "That's our Jesus Manifesto...not anything that the church came up with, but what Jesus said."

The Sermon on the Mount was one of the most radical spiritual endeavors in history. Jesus took people away from the city, away from religion, out into the countryside. The Sea of Galilee is a beautiful place; it's like central Texas, so it's not huge, the trees are small, the mountains and rivers are small, but it's still very beautiful.

Imagine not being in church, imagine being in the countryside. Now if you have a really strong imagination, imagine it's not a preacher but Jesus talking. A lot of imagination would be required for that. (laughter) So it's not here, it's out in nature, and it's not me, it's someone who has mastered the teachings of love, and is embodying them and calling you to them. And then he starts off with these strange phrases, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are you if you mourn." What a horrible beginning to a sermon...to start with this conundrum that drives you crazy. "Blessed are those who are sad?" I'm sorry, that doesn't make any sense.

But what's happening is Jesus knows we have to start here. Jesus isn't trying to get a big organization going. He's interested in finding the friends of humankind, and to do that you have to have a very different idea of what happiness is. It takes a radical inversion of values, a completely different way of defining happiness from how it is and has been defined by our culture. What Jesus is saying, in a nutshell, is this: *change your idea of happiness from personal success to human solidarity*. And he's going to say this eight different ways. We don't have

time to get into all of them, but realize that there's a jewel here called happiness, and what Jesus is saying is that if you think your idea of happiness is having something, if you think your idea of happiness comes from the approval that other people give you, you haven't yet gone into the depths of happiness that are available to you.

Now realize that you're probably going to get afraid when these suggestions are made, and probably your heart is going to be saying, "No," "Uh-uh." That's what most of the people in Jesus' audience probably said, too. Did you ever notice in scripture that whenever Jesus starts to get a good crowd, he says something obnoxious? That's why I do it. (laughter) Whenever everyone gets comfortable, we're going in the wrong direction. We're certainly not growing as much as we could.

To be a loving human being requires a toleration for ambiguity that does not come naturally. We have to go into training, and that was what the early church was about. It took about three years to join the early church. There was training, and it was very intensive, because you were changing your identity. When you see the Sermon on the Mount, half of us are going to say, "What am I supposed to believe?" and the other half will say, "What am I supposed to do?" That's what the church has reduced it to. What are you supposed to believe, just tell me what I'm supposed to believe, and I'll do it. But that's not happiness, is it? To recite the wisdom of others is not happiness. What Jesus is trying to give you is wisdom from the inside out, and that takes some time. But isn't it interesting that he starts with, "Blessed are the poor, the poor in spirit." If we are not willing to go through that radical transformation, then we bring our problems into the world.

Have you ever heard of Typhoid Mary? The story of Typhoid Mary is very interesting. She wanted to do charity, she wanted to help people, but she had typhus, so instead of waiting and healing, she went into the work before she was ready. What a great model for why it took three years before people could get started in the early church. What a great lesson about why Martin Luther King wouldn't let people march with him until they had gone through the discipline and the training. Because when we want to go out and save the world, we forget to ask the question, "Who's going to save the world from us?" (laughter)

We've had two train wrecks in a row. George Bush had a horrible vision for humankind, but you couldn't see that until it had played out, and then the whole world said, "Oh, my God!" And now we have Obama, who had a beautiful vision for humankind, but apparently doesn't believe it, and is certainly not willing to pay the cost for it. As a result, it's coming out stillborn...disowned.

What Jesus is saying is to put your hope in something deeper than that, and stop waiting for somebody from the outside to rescue us. What the world needs is citizens for the new world. When you see that kingdom of God, kingdom of God, realm of God, it's talking about how the world could be, and it's calling us to live in that world now, and saying that you're happy if you're living that way now. You're already experiencing a foretaste of heaven if you're living this way now.

But of course you don't believe it right away. It takes time to trust it. That doesn't make you inferior, that's just how we start...by saying, "Oh my God, no. No, no, no, no." It's scary, so Jesus takes people away from the church, away from the city, from their nation, from their economic structure, and puts them on a hill, and says, "Who are you as a human being?" Not what should you think, not what should you do, but what is a human being in the world. "Blessed are those who know that their value does not come from what they have." That's one way of understanding that first beatitude. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Another way to understand it is, "Blessed are those who live in solidarity with the poor." Because when we disown the poor, we have to start getting numb when we see them.

Does anybody here get afraid when they see a poor person? When you're in the street and see somebody who's shabby, in dirty clothes, do you feel fear? They're not the ones robbing you. They're not the ones poisoning the world. It's the people we put on a pedestal that are poisoning us...that are betraying us, and torturing children yet unborn. To get off that train, we have to go through a radical transformation inside.

They're having the G8 meeting in Canada. The world economic structures are all about protecting the rich from the poor. Why do you think the head of the World Bank is chosen by the President of the United States? Why do you think often it's the Secretary of Defense who is chosen for that economic slot? Because like most of the laws, the economic systems are built to protect the rich from the poor. And guess what? We're on a train headed in one of those directions. Did you read that Detroit has had to shut down 77 parks? Not enough money. Do you know what the bill for security for the G8 meeting was? A billion dollars. A billion dollars to make sure that no poor people crossed the lines.

Michael Moore did an interview with the head of Nike, and asked him if he would go and visit his factories in Indonesia to see the slave conditions there. Do you know what the chairperson, the CEO of Nike said? He's never been to any of his factories in Indonesia. He couldn't do the job if he had seen the slave conditions there.

Remember Kathie Lee Gifford? She's a very decent human being, head of this clothing line, but had never seen the working conditions in her factories. She's actually taking money, giving charity to children's causes, not realizing that her clothes were sewn by children's slave labor. This is an example of a dissociation that takes place. Jesus is saying, "Blessed are you if you end that division between yourself and the poor, and you identify yourself not with what you have, not with success, but with humanity." To move from the idea of personal success to solidarity with humankind is very, very important.

Then he says, "Blessed are those who grieve, who mourn." To feel what's happening in our world hurts. It hurts, and we have to decide if we're going to close off that pain and not feel what's happening in the rest of the world. Our comfort in this country is built on the misery of people all over the world. Obama ran on the slogan, "Yes, we can do it," but we never asked the question, "Should we do it?" If turning around our economy means that other people have to live in misery, is that the way to go? Or should we stop trying to *save* the world and *join* it...actually join the world community, and let people speak for themselves? A new idea; it's crazy, I know. It takes time to feel that.

One of the funny things that happens in our church, and I love it, is that when people start coming here, I can see these scowls, then I see them start getting it, and after about two years, people start telling me how much better I'm doing with my preaching. (laughter) What that means is that the grieving process has been taking place. You don't feel like you're having flesh ripped out. You're understanding an idea of happiness that goes deeper, and doesn't have to numb itself to what's happening. Blessed are those who are able to feel the pain of the world.

I'm only going to discuss three of the Beatitudes. If you want to, read the whole thing; there are eight of them. Read the whole Sermon on the Mount. It's very remarkable stuff. It says, "Blessed are you if you're persecuted for caring about justice." Now in America you probably won't be tortured. We only do that to outsiders, and that's shipped offshore, so that doesn't really count. It's happening in other countries, so don't think about it. (I'm kidding, I'm being facetious.) But what happens in our culture when you live this stuff out, or speak of it is that you get laughed at. Is that going to be enough to keep you from speaking your truth? That will probably be the decision that you'll have to make. Will you live in the whole world even if it costs you a promotion? Will you live in the whole world even if it means that you're going to lose part of your family speaking to you? Will you live in the whole world if it costs you? That's what Jesus is trying to say at the very start. It's truth in advertising. The love that Jesus came to teach is radical and universal; it has a cost, and it's worth the cost.

When we started off here as a community we began as "The Little Church with the Big Heart." A great place to start; we do love each other. And then we opened and said everyone is welcome here; "Open Minds, Open Hearts." It's time for Chapter Three. First decide in a positive sense what that means in day-to-day living in our personal lives and for the world. I suggest that we think about lifting up The Jesus Manifesto; the real one, the Sermon on the Mount, and that we lift up that idea of radical love, universal love as a description of who we are. Jorge Lara-Braud translated this "Happy Are;" he said "It's a Good Adventure." If we go this route, we're guaranteed an adventure and a *good* adventure, but most importantly, what we're guaranteed in the Sermon on the Mount is if we walk this path, we will live a life worth living.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.