

How to be Happy: Are You Kidding Me?

Matthew 5:1-12

We've heard the Beatitudes so often and heard them preached so often that our eyes glaze over when we hear them. Same with the preacher!

The key word throughout is “blessed” or “happy.” And it carries the sense of congratulations. Blessed are they, happy are they, congrats to those who....

Every Greek philosopher worth his salt wrote about “Happiness”, or *eudaemonia*. It did not refer to giddiness but to *a good life well lived*. One wrote: “Happy are those who receive everything they desire, provided they do not desire amiss!” Wanting amiss is easy to do! The beatitudes are Jesus' take on the subject—and his is startlingly different.

I

I reported last month in a sermon that if you google “happiness” there are 30,000 results. Recent books on the subject number in the hundreds. Ours is a happiness-obsessed culture—and this in a nation that ranks as one of the most unhappy nations on earth. We are so unhappy in America, and amid such abundance! What does happiness mean anyway? Jesus is trying to lead us there.

And what about this word “blessed”? What does that mean? We often hear someone say, “Have a blessed day!” It may mean many different things in the minds of the ones who say it. I saw a T-shirt that said: “Too Blessed to Be Stressed.” I have no idea what that means.

There is a popular hashtag about in Twitter and Instagram circles: #blessed! Hashtag blessed! Kate Bowler, Duke Divinity School professor and writer says of blessing and this hashtag:

We live in a culture of blessing. We live in a culture of #Blessed. #Blessed is attached to anything from a birth announcement, to a new boyfriend, to a rental car upgrade, to barely-there bikini shots.

Kate Bowler, by the way, wrote her dissertation on the prosperity gospel in America, and a few years ago was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer as a young mother in her 30s. She has thought deeply about such things. Her first best selling book is entitled, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*.

So, when we followers of Jesus start to think about happiness and blessedness we have our work cut out for us. Jesus' ideas about happiness and blessedness may cause us to scratch our heads. So, the title of this sermon is: “How to Be Happy: Are You Kidding Me?”

II

In his Beatitudes Jesus is talking about life in the kingdom of God, and his is an “upside-down kingdom”. Clarence Jordan called the kingdom: “God’s new order!” It’s values and the values of the world rarely match up. When Jesus said to Pilate “My kingdom is not of this world”, he did not mean “my kingdom is not *in* this world, but that its values were different from the prevailing values of the world. The Beatitudes of Jesus are to use the words of the poet Hopkins: “Counter, original, spare, strange.” As I said last week about his teachings, they are not Hallmark greeting card inscriptions.

Richard Rohr calls Jesus’ teachings “counter-intuitive wisdom.” Here is his summary of such spiritual wisdom:

- We suffer to heal
- We surrender to win
- We die to live
- We give it away to keep it

That’s not like our world. We *fight* to win!

III

As I looked at the Beatitudes this week what struck me was how all of them require *vulnerability*—something we avoid like the proverbial bubonic plague.

-To be poor in spirit is to make yourself vulnerable to God. It is to say, “I need you!” We need such vulnerability in all our most important relationships, too.

-To be meek—the word “gentle” is the better translation—means you know life is fragile. So “Handle With Care.”

-To hunger and thirst after justice and righteousness is to acknowledge our need for justice and everyone’s need for justice, and our need to be the kind of person we want to be, full of God’s goodness.

-To be merciful acknowledges our need to be merciful and kind to ourselves and to others.

-To be pure in heart means to want with singleness of heart to see God and serve God.

-To be peace makers requires vulnerability because it recognizes our need for peace with ourselves and in the world. We start here with ourselves, as Gandhi put it: “Be the change you wish to see.”

-To be persecuted, rejected, ridiculed is to make yourself vulnerable for the sake of God, the way of Jesus and all that is good.

Brene Brown is followed by millions in her books, speeches and pod-casts. A major theme of her research and writing is the need to be vulnerable in order to live life at its deepest and fullest. She writes:

I define vulnerability as uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. With that definition in mind, let's think about love. Waking up every day and loving someone who may not love us back, whose safety we can't ensure, who may stay in our lives or may leave without a moment's notice, who may be loyal to the day we die or betray us tomorrow.

Now that's vulnerability! Vulnerability, she says, is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, creativity, accountability and authenticity.

I believe that to join yourself to the kingdom of God and its purposes is to join yourself to vulnerability. After all, who knows how it will all turn out?

V

So, we add: vulnerability requires courage, and courage is involved in living the Beatitudes. It's like vulnerability and courage are like two sides of the same coin. Brene Brown thinks so. She writes this:

Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness; it's our greatest measure of courage.¹

So, now let's look at the Beatitudes again.

-It takes courage to know and admit your need of God and your need of others.

-It takes courage to be in touch with your own pain and the pain in the world, what Unamuno called "The Common Weeping."

-It takes courage to be gentle, for although Jesus promises that the meek will inherit the earth, gentleness may get us clobbered in the meantime.

-It takes courage to hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness. Justice may be a long-time coming in a world with little appetite for either justice or righteousness. We often fail in our best attempts at them. But we get back up, dust ourselves off and try again. Courage.

-It takes courage to be merciful and show mercy. It may be thrown back in our faces. It takes courage to be kind and merciful to yourself. Buddhists call this quality *maître*, our capacity to befriend you own self and be kind to yourself. They call it "self-compassion."

-It takes courage to seek to be pure-in-heart, to throw yourself whole heartedly into life, to live with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. There is no risk in being half-hearted.

-It takes courage to be a peacemaker. You might get shot at by both sides, or all sides.

-It takes courage to be willing to be rejected, persecuted, ridiculed, to be different for God's sake and your own sake. The poet e.e. cummings wrote:

To be nobody-but-yourself
in a world which is doing
it's best, night and day, to make
you everybody-else—means
to fight the hardest battle which
any human can fight;
and never stop fighting.

So Jesus invites us to courage in his Beatitudes. Start small, start now. Courage in little things will lead to courage in big things. And courage is contagious. Courageous people inspire courage in us. A church that takes a courageous stand or does a courageous thing inspires courage in other people and congregations.

The greatest courage of all is *the courage to love*. Behind every act of courage is love, love for another, love for what is right, love for your nation or community, love for what is good and beautiful and true.

In these beatitudes Jesus may be saying that the kingdom of God is a *school of vulnerability and courage*. If that is so, maybe the church can be a school of

vulnerability and courage, where we learn and find out how to live fully and freely, full of love and life as the daughters and sons of God.

Amen

1. Brene Brown, *Rising Strong: The Reckoning, the Rumble, the Revolution* (N.Y.: Spiegel&Gran,2015), 4.