

“Blessings that Orient and Disorient”

Matthew 5:1-12

Several translations and paraphrases of the Bible, such as the Good News Version and the Living Bible, render “blessed” as “happy.” Thus, the Beatitudes read: *happy are they*. Think about how happiness tends to be understood among us. Dominant synonyms might include “care-free” and “affluent.” A “happy” scene would be one where anything (and anyone) that might make us feel bad would be out of sight and out of mind. But is that what is meant in Jesus’ Beatitudes? To be blessed of God is not to know pleasure while remaining oblivious to the pain or want or injustice around us. Rather, to be blessed of God orients us to see God’s favor at work in the very situations and on behalf of the very ones whose appearances might seem anything but blessed.

God’s blessing here of those who hunger for food or justice runs counter to some current conventional wisdoms about such ones. Such “wisdoms” would say: if you are poor, if you are hungry, if you are sorrowing, if you are wronged – then your life is *not* blessed. In less charitable moments, it might even say, you are cursed. *You wouldn’t be in that position if you worked harder, or prayed more.* . . . Jesus’ beatitudes disorient such conventional judgments and attitudes with the declaration of God’s unconventional grace pronounced by Jesus: *Blessed **are** those . . .*

The beatitudes are about *now* and *then*. Each one begins with *blessed are the*. . . But what follows? *For theirs is* OR *for theirs will be*. As Christ’s disciples: we cannot hope apart from the future, and we cannot live detached from the present. Jesus’ beatitudes straddle present and future, now and then, for the sake of vocation and promise. The present orients us to the time in which the words of blessedness aim to shape our attitudes and conduct. The future orients us to purposes and promises that may remain fleeting or clouded in these moments. In doing both, the beatitudes help us live Godward now and into the future with direction, integrity, and hope.

The 2006 National Prayer Breakfast, I believe at the request of President George Bush, invited the Irish musician Bono to speak. How that relates to Jesus’ beatitudes is simple: among his remarks, Bono offered words that seem to me a compelling 21st century re-visioning of our text:

*“God is in the slums, in the cardboard houses where the poor play house.
God is in the silence of a mother who infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives.
God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war.
God is in the debris of wasted opportunities and lives.
And God is with us, if we are with them.”*

For Reflection and Action:

*What does the word “bless” mean to you: in everyday life; in your faith journey?
Imagine the Beatitudes as a church mission statement: how might they (re)orient:
Our life together; our missional work; our personal self-care?*