

## What's Real?

Micah 6:1-8; I Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

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More and more we find ourselves living in a world often called “surreal” or bizarre, weird, or unreal. The video of the beating to death of Tyre Nichols by five Memphis, TN police officers, while numerous other officers stood by, has left us all in shock. It's unbelievable. It's surreal.

My question is: has this surreal world become the real? Police trained in a combat model of policing and so habituated to violence as a way of life, that what we might call surreal is what they consider real. They beat to death an unarmed young black man, and not only do they think nothing is wrong; they are giving fist-bumps to one another in congratulations. Is this the new real?

Every day we are inundated with the surreal. Constant Trump lies, only to be topped by the lies of George Santos, and the ludicrous claims by TV huckster Tucker Carlson, along with so many other loud talking politicians proudly spouting bizarre and weird conspiracies that we are becoming dulled to what is real and what is surreal. The truth is becoming so devalued and debased that the only thing that matters is power.

Sometime ago I saw an ad for a college that said, “We prepare you for the real world.” Is this the real world?

Seventeenth century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously declared that the real world is “solitary, hard, brutish, and short.” My friend Barry Harvey at Baylor has written (see *Another City: An Ecclesiological primer for a Post-Christian World*) that Hobbes’ believed that this world is driven by *bellum omnia contra omnes*, “the war of all against all.” Hobbes said that from time immemorial, violent competition has been the way of the world and peace in this system is only possible by total domination of one against all others, like the Pax Romana of ancient times.

Harvey argues, the early church envisioned another city and created a community based on peaceful cooperation. The church said, “We believe the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ changes the real. And we’re putting our lives at stake to live it out.”

I heard the biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann say a long time ago, that ordination is “the church putting its hands on your head saying, ‘tell us what is real.’” That’s my calling, whether I’m up to it or not, whether I feel like it or not, and whether I want to or not. My vocation is to tell you what is real.

Jesus gathers his disciples on a hillside and a larger crowd gathers around them. He gathers them to tell them what is real. From our standard perspective, few texts in the Bible are more unreal than this scripture, known as the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon, this teaching of Jesus, composes Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7 and is the very heart of the Christian message.

This Sermon on the Mount begins with the famous Beatitudes, which is the focus of our Scripture Lesson this morning. We’ve heard the Beatitudes so many

times that they have become domesticated and tamed to us. We no longer hear them as astonishing news, as incredible news, as a counter-cultural manifesto that provokes a crisis.

What a contrast to our world's ways of thinking of what's real. Our society might say here's what's real:

*Blessed are the strong in spirit, for they will make their heaven on earth.*  
*Blessed are those who are unfeeling, for they shall be invulnerable.*  
*Blessed are the aggressive, for they shall get what they want.*  
*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for power, for they shall dominate.*  
*Blessed are the merciless, for they shall not see those who suffer.*  
*Blessed are the duplicitous, for they shall fool everybody.*  
*Blessed are the warriors, for they will be called the winners.*  
*Blessed are you when you are popular and praised by all, for you will get ahead in this life and have great success.*

Jesus turns all this on its head – upside-down, or perhaps right-side up. In the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the Beatitudes, he redefines what is real. He starts by encouraging folks who are hanging on by their fingernails. Again and again, he says “blessed” are you. You are encouraged and receive joy now, present tense, based upon the future. We keep on and don't give up, not because life is easy, but because our trust is in God's coming kingdom.

Blessed are you who are poor in spirit, who have come to the end of your own resources. Who can't sustain hope out of your own strength, who are walking the edge of despair. Who are ground up and beaten down you will be treated as royalty by God.

Blessed are you who mourn and grieve over the hurt in the world, over climate change, over homeless people in the cold of winter, over gun violence, over the powerful grinding down the powerless, you will be comforted.

Blessed are you who are meek, who patiently trust that God is working and God is coming, and blessed are you who are righteous, who are generous with what you have, who stand up for justice, who seek good on behalf of others, and who are learning to be content with simple necessities in a possession-hungry world, and who insist in being non-violent in a violent society, God will comfort you and take care of you.

Blessed are you who are merciful and who show kindness to others, who are more eager to forgive than to punish, who are more ready to show compassion than to exact due, you are like God who is merciful with us.

Blessed are you who pure in heart, who are people of integrity, whose words are backed up by convictions and by how you live, whose outward deeds are matched by inward commitments, you will see and know God.

Blessed are you who make peace, who work to stop wars and who seek to reconcile in personal relationships, who conduct yourselves peaceably, let go of grudges, help settle quarrels, and who know how to say, "I was wrong; please forgive me." You are God's children.

Blessed are you who are persecuted, hassled, hounded, and intimidated for seeking justice and peace, who work so people have living wages and good health care. Who are anti-racists, who believe and work for quality public schools, and having a quality city government. Who have people muttering about you because

you seek the righteousness of God. Be encouraged. The old ways of the world are already obsolete, the kingdom of God is already breaking in.

All of us whom Jesus called to follow him, are encouraged and given hope and strength because in Jesus we see the new Way of God. It is not simply that Jesus tells us about it; he is it.

The Apostle Paul says this Way of Jesus, what he calls the Way of the Cross, is foolishness according to the world, but it is how God works. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Paul says this is what's real.

Our Old Testament reading from Micah says that loud bluster, bullying and demeaning others, is not what's real. Micah says God tells us what's real: do justice, love kindness, and walking humbly with God. Not noisy but quiet. Not arrogant but humble.

These reading this morning from the Micah 6, from I Corinthians 1, and from the Sermon on the Mount are among the greatest texts in the entire Bible. These are the mountaintops of the Bible, and the life God calls us to.

Notice how much of these mountaintops of the Scriptures are about the real world. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about real stuff like grief and comfort, salt and light, of how we treat each other, how we treat our neighbors, and even how we treat our enemies. He talks about prayer that is rooted right where we live and that we will make priorities in our lives based upon what it is we truly treasure. He talks about reconciling with those who have offended us, sure foundations are built on the Word of God, and not wasting holy things on

pigs. He says if we are hit on the right cheek, then turn to them the other. If anyone wants your coat, give them your undergarments as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second.

No, it is not that Jesus is unreal. He is all too much real. Perhaps it is a reality we don't like or maybe don't know what to do with.

So, I think that often Sunday mornings are an extended argument over the question, "What's real?" We argue with God and we argue with ourselves over what's real and what we're going to do with about it.

I think it's instructive to see who were listening to Jesus. Who heard him? At the end of Matthew 4, it says, "So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan" (4:24-25). Now, while we're not sure who else was there, we do know that the down-and-out, the left-out, the ground-out, beaten-down, the troubled, the sick, the poor, the helpless, and the hopeless were there to hear Jesus. The very people who knew they were not blessed just like they know they are not blessed in today's world. Indeed, they believe that they are cursed. Yet Jesus is telling them they are blessed. Jesus is telling them that God knows and cares and blesses them.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove tells of leading a Bible Study in Durham, North Carolina made up of about half seminary students and half with homeless and people who were poor. They were reading the Beatitudes together and when they finished, there was silence. No one said a word. Then one of the homeless men,

who lived in the homeless shelter, asked, “You mean Jesus said that?” And Jonathan nodded. The man got excited. “Jesus is talking to us, man!” He sat up on the edge of his chair and smiled and laughed, “We’re the poor. We’re the ones who are crying and hungry and thirsty. And Jesus says we’re blessed!”

For this homeless man, what’s real suddenly had changed.

Years ago, when I lived in Atlanta and was a member of Oakhurst Baptist Church, we had a Wed. night supper in the fellowship hall. It was a mixture of church members, mostly professors and professionals, along with men from the church’s homeless shelter. One night, the question was, “Why are you in this church?” Someone spoke up, “I’m glad to be a part of a church that is open-minded and not afraid to think.” Another said, “I’m a musician and I appreciate the classical music on Sunday mornings.” Someone else, “I like the good preaching.” Then one of the homeless men stood up. He had been addicted to crack cocaine on the streets and stumbled into the church’s shelter begging for help. The director told him that he would try to get him into a rehab program but that it might take a while, but if he would stick with the church in this shelter, they would do all they could to help him stay clean and sober. Then they had knelt in the floor and prayed together. That was three years before. The man said, “God saved me in this church.”

Everyone looked sheepishly at one another. We were there for the music and thinking nice thoughts. He was there for salvation.

Steve Shoemaker, when he was at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, remembers their Agape Meal, when hungry and homeless people are fed around

round dinner tables in fellowship hall every Thursday night and then they have the Lord's Supper in the chapel for anyone and everyone. There was a transgender woman named Amanda, who took two years to make it from the dinner table to the Communion Table. She talked about coming to the Lord's Table as she tried to gather her courage. When she came, when she got to the Lord's Table, she said, I've never felt more loved and accepted and blessed in my whole life than here on Thursday nights. And all my life I've been told this is the last place I'd be welcome.

These are real people, hearing the real gospel of Christ. And here's the deal: Together we keep on practicing this real-world gospel right in the middle of this surreal life around us.

A long time ago, in seminary Clinical Pastoral Education, we were given brief training in preparation for dealing with patients of dementia. We were taught basic Reality Therapy. We were taught to walk in the room and say, "What is your name?" "What day is it?" "Where are you?" "Who are you?"

Every Sunday, Jesus gathers us around himself and conducts Reality Therapy with us. "What day is it?" And we say, "Today is Sunday, the day of resurrection, the Lord's Day. On this day, 2,000 years ago, the whole world shifted on its axis, when after being killed by the Powers of this old world, God refused to give up and began again with the resurrected Christ."

"Who are you?" "We are beloved children of God who are also sinners, but forgiven sinners, sinners being redeemed, who, little by little, are becoming who God created us to be."



“Where are you?” “We are members of the body of Christ called Austin Heights Baptist Church, an outpost of God’s kingdom in East Texas. A preview of what God wants for all Creation. A people of God’s justice and peace and love and forgiveness.”

And Jesus says to us, “Blessed are you.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.