

The Best of Us and the Best in Us
The Beatitudes, Mathew 5:1-12
Wilton Presbyterian Church
Rev. Shannon A White
November 1, 2020

I'm fairly sure that the lectionary committee did not have political foresight when it assigned the Beatitudes text for this week's reading. The lectionary cycle of texts was set long ago. However, this IS the text for this week as well as for All Saint's Day... and given that, this text is perfect for us in this time of our lives. I don't know about you, but on this day, I **need** to hear the vocabulary of blessings, and mercy, and the hunger and thirst for righteousness, and poor in spirit, and meekness, and comfort for those who mourn... I need to be reminded of the blessing for the peacemakers among us and the pure in heart. That language is sorely needed right now indeed, and I need to see how people have lived that out and are currently are living that out. This passage points to... **the best of us and the best in us!** That is a hope-filled message for this day.

The Beatitudes is one of the most well-known and beloved texts of Jesus' earthly ministry. It is part of the Sermon on the Mount, a sermon which Jesus gave, which pretty much sums up what it means to be and act like a disciple.

On this morning, rather than go into the technicalities of the texts, I thought I'd tell a couple of stories about people who have put this text into action... saints, if you will. Ordinary people who live out their beatitudes' faith in everyday life.

I don't know if the first story is true or not. It first appeared in 1975 in Ensign Magazine. It's called "Three Red Marbles" by WE Petersen.

I've adapted it a bit, but it goes like this, as told from the perspective of an onlooker, and the story is obviously from the south, hence the accent:

One day Mr. Miller was bagging some early potatoes for me. I noticed a small boy, delicate of bone and feature, ragged but clean, hungrily apprising a basket of freshly picked green peas.

I paid for my potatoes but was also drawn to the display of fresh green peas. I am a pushover for creamed peas and new potatoes.

Pondering the peas, I couldn't help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller and the (young) boy next to me.

"Hello Barry, how are you today?"

"H'lo, Mr. Miller. Fine, thank ya. Jus' admirin' them peas... sure look good."

"They are good, Barry. How's your Ma?"

"Fine. Gittin' stronger alla' time."

"Good. Anything I can help you with?"

"No, Sir. Jus' admirin' them peas."

"Would you like to take some home?"

"No, Sir. Got nuthin' to pay for 'em with."

"Well, what have you to trade me for some of those peas?"

"All I got's my prize marble here."

"Is that right? Let me see it."

"Here 'tis. She's a dandy."

"I can see that. Hmmmmm, only thing is this one is blue, and I sort of go for red. Do you have a red one like this at home?"

"Not zackley ... but almost."

"Tell you what. Take this sack of peas home with you and next trip this way let me look at that red marble."

"Sure will. Thanks Mr. Miller."

Mrs. Miller, who had been standing nearby, came over to help me. With a smile she said, "There are two other boys like him in our community, all three are in very poor circumstances. Jim just loves to bargain with them for peas, apples, tomatoes, or whatever. When they come back with their red marbles, and they always do, he decides he doesn't like red after all and he sends them home with a bag of produce for a green marble or an orange one, perhaps."

The story goes on... after some years when the young storyteller grows up and finds out that Mr. Miller has died, he goes to the funeral. He sees three young men... one in an army uniform and the other two in nice dress shirts and suits. They approach Mrs. Miller, standing composed and smiling by her husband's casket. Each of the young men hug her, kiss her on the cheek, speak briefly with her and move on to the casket. Her misty light blue eyes follow them as, one by one, each young man stops briefly and places his own warm hand over the cold pale hand in the casket. Each leaving the mortuary awkwardly, wiping his eyes.

The storyteller, also now grown says, Our turn came to meet Mrs. Miller. I told her who I was and mentioned the story she had told me about the marbles. With her eyes glistening, she took my hand and led me to the casket. "Those three young men who just left were the boys I told you about. They just told me how they appreciated the things Jim 'traded' them. Now, at last, when Jim

could not change his mind about color or size... they came to pay their debt."

"We've never had a great deal of the wealth of this world," she confided, "but right now, Jim would consider himself the richest man in Idaho."

With loving gentleness, she lifted the lifeless fingers of her deceased husband.

Resting underneath were three exquisitely shined red marbles.

The second story IS true and was in the *Washington Post* this week, called "Do something! Do something!" It's the story of Mary Jo Copland, on choosing decency over anxiety and fear.

Mary Jo, who is a young 78-years- old, has been feeding hungry people in Minnesota for the last 40 years. She runs a non-profit there and still... even in Covid, dons her mask and greets people who need assistance at the door as they come in for food, clothing and other necessities.

To those of us who may feel frozen and afraid to reach out to our fellow humans in need, she says this, *"I've lost more this year than ever, but what good have negativity and fear ever done for people? Nothing. Zero. You can waste your whole life as one endless complaint. Okay, yes, this country has big problems. But who do you think is going to solve them? It's up to us. I believe in perpetual motion. Do something. Do something! If you see something that needs to be changed, try changing it. If you see somebody who needs help, help them. People act like that's saintly, but shouldn't it be basic? Why isn't it basic?"*

I was listening to a podcast this week, and was introduced to a phrase with which I deeply connected... having "humility for my humanity."

Humility for my humanity. None of us is perfect... we know that... we all are afraid, and unsure. We all have weaknesses, some of which are not at all our fault. We all have wounds which are healed when we come together in community. We all have patterns which keep us from connecting with one another and with God and so much of what we're seeing and hearing. This phrase humility in my humanity is the stance which allows Jesus, the bringer of peace, to come and bless us and to prompt us forward.

The Beatitudes are a call to action to be church, a call to action to make Jesus present and visible and manifest when the world tries desperately to silence those who speak the truth.

"There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days, the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society..."

If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning..."
(Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail").

So... what can you do today... how can you be different? May we live out the best in us and show the best of us.

May it be so... Amen!