

Psalm 15

- ¹ O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?
- ² Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;
- ³ who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;
- ⁴ in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honor those who fear the LORD;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
- ⁵ who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.
Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Matthew 5:1-12

¹When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Sermon

This last week the television show “The Good Place” ended its four year run on NBC. It’s not the great philosophical work some claim it to be, but it’s sweet and kind and funny and fully of fantastically thoughtful, comedic acting. I genuinely enjoyed watching it. For those of you whose eyes are not as square as mine, The Good Place tells the story of Eleanor Shellstrop who dies and goes to “The Good Place,” what some might call Heaven. But the problem is, it’s a mistake. Eleanor lived a terrible, ugly, selfish life on earth, and she should have, according to the rules of the show, gone to the Bad Place. She knows this, and so she enlists the help of a dead professor of moral ethics to help her reform her ways, so she can remain hidden in the Good Place, passing...or perhaps becoming...a good person.

One of the aspects of the show I love is the careful imagining of what “The Good Place” and “The Bad Place” might look like. In the Good Place you can eat as much frozen yogurt as you’d like, and the flavors and combinations are endless. You receive a house built exactly to the specifications of what you’d consider to be a perfect house. Your soulmate is there, and if you never got to meet them in life, well you’re in luck! There’s flying day, when everyone gets to practice flying through the air, and parties with endless tables of good food. The Bad Place is equally funny and creative in their imagining of eternal torment, but I’m not going to repeat them, as many are not, strictly speaking, church appropriate.

I think it’s a popular show, in part, because everyone asks these questions, many of us from a very young age: what is heaven like? Is there a heaven? What about hell? Is anyone in hell? Is it fair? I think we do this, in part, because we’re curious. We want to know that our loved ones are at peace, and we’d like to imagine that their peace is blissful and lovely. But I think we also do it when we’re dissatisfied about this world we’re living in right now. If we believe in a world yet to come, it can become a tempting distraction from the here and now of this moment. We can imagine that even if those who do truly evil, heinous things in this life don’t get their comeuppance in the legal system, they’ll get what’s coming in the judgement yet to come. We can hope and dream that those who are treated without compassion in this life, never finding a place of home or safety or satiety, that they will be filled fill and loved deeply and taken care of in the justice of the world to come.

As Christians, this is what we popularly call Heaven and Hell, but I personally prefer the language of the Kingdom or Reign of God. In Greek the phrase is *basileia tou theou*. We translate it into English as the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, the Reign of God, the Kin-dom of God, and more.

This is one of those words worth hearing the Greek, because Jesus’ audience that warm afternoon, as he sat on the side of the hill and preached his sermon on the mount, they would have possibly heard the word in Greek, and it would have brought to mind a very specific comparison. See, *basileia* was also one of the most common words used to name the Roman Empire. We don’t say “Roman Kingdom” today, so we miss this connotation. But it would have been obvious to Jesus’ listeners, and certainly to those reading and hearing this account in Matthew’s gospel, it being written in Greek.

When Jesus jumps into this sermon on the mount, the very first thing he says is:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

We might recognize this as the beginnings of the Beatitudes, all those “blessed are” statements. Instead of jumping into the whole list today, instead, I just want to stick with this one, because it paints the scene for the rest of Jesus’ sermon, which we’ll be looking at over the next few weeks.

The first thing Jesus says is that those who are poor in spirit will be given a *basileia tou theou*. A new kingdom, one, it is implied, in opposition to Rome.

To try to make this point a little bit more relatable, this is like if I stood up and started my sermon by saying “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the United States of God.” You all would immediately know what I’m implicating, right? That statement says—things are not right in the United States of America, but trust me that a new United States is coming, and it will be of God.

And, of course, things were not right in the Kingdom of Rome. The taxation was outrageous, the Roman Army kept control through a campaign of state sanctioned violence and terror, it was a state held together by oppression and slavery and blood. And the people of the Judean countryside were, I would hazard to guess, pretty poor in spirit. Pretty beaten up, exhausted, beleaguered, laid low. Tired of fighting for something that might never come to fruition—their freedom, their respect, their self-determination.

It’s into this that Jesus begins his sermon. Blessed are you are who are utterly exhausted by this dark and dreary world—for yours will be the *basileia tou theou*, the Kingdom of Heaven. And he proceeds on from there.

This matters because it’s an invitation as much as a promise. Jesus is invited the people gathered, all of them, who all would likely have been “poor in spirit” to join him in imagining a new way of living, a new kingdom, a new reign.

He was inviting them to imagine with him their own “Good Place.”

But, of course, Jesus’ Good Place isn’t full of streets made of trampolines and never ending froyo, and palatial houses of our imaginations. No. Jesus instead paints a picture where mourners are comforted, where those who are self-possessed and even keel will lead our care for the earth. Jesus promises that if you’re hungry, literally or figuratively, you will be filled. Where mercy and peace and kindness and gentility of heart will be rewarded and celebrated, not abused and used for dark purposes. Jesus’ Good Place, unlike the heaven of so many of our imaginings, isn’t about the stuff, the trappings, the comfort and ease. It’s about justice and righteousness and people.

And, I think, it’s stronger and more hopeful for this imagining.

Because I don't need another yoga class or just a good bar of chocolate or even a week in Hawaii or whatever to feel better about the state of our world right now. Right? It might temporarily make me feel a bit better, but it doesn't last. What I need is an imagination that can picture a new Kingdom, where children aren't separated from their parents and locked in cages to die of preventable diseases at our nation's border. I need to imagine a world in which judgement is even handed for everyone, not just those with the money and time and power to hire the most effective lawyers. I want to imagine a world in which Portland streets aren't filled with tents, but where people have warm, comfortable, welcoming homes. Even the best froyo can't make me feel better about the state of the world, much as I might hope.

And this imagination matters, because if we can imagine this kind of place, we can help build it.

OPB reported a pretty great example of this just a few days ago.¹ The Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians saw a problem with the world as it is: Native Americans have the largest homeless populations in Portland, per capita. And so they imagined something better. They applied for and received a grant to build affordable, supportive housing in the city, rather than on the reservation, and they built the Nesika Illahee center, up on 42nd ave in the Cully neighborhood of NE Portland. They have 59 units, at least 20 of which are given preference for tribal members. The building is drug and alcohol free, and they offer ongoing rehabilitation support, psychiatric and medical care, dental care and women's health and diabetes support, primary care givers and more. The walls, both interior and exterior, are covered with art by native artists. Nesika Illahee translates to "Our Place" in the Chinook, and it struck me as such a literal example of what Jesus is teaching here—we are invited into the work of creating a Good Place in Our Place, by actually imagining what it might be.

And this is what I want you to keep in mind for the next few weeks as we read through parts of Jesus' sermon on the mount. Remember that he starts by offering us an invitation, that this entire sermon is a collective art project that we're invited into 2000 years later. We get to be part of this imagining. The Kingdom of God is coming, and it will stand against the basileias of this world: Rome, homelessness, poverty, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and all the rest. And in it, all people will be welcome. All people will have enough. So, let us free up our imaginations to join with Jesus in imaging and bringing about a Good Place in our world, not just in the world to come.

¹ <https://www.opb.org/news/article/portland-oregon-affordable-housing-native-americans-confederated-tribes-siletz/>