

1-29-17 "Blessed Are As Blessed Is" A Reflection on the Beatitudes Mt 5:1-12 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

Well, a fair amount has transpired since I was last with you. The world has been busy, clearly kept on spinning despite my absence—like on steroids even.

For starters we've had two significant new additions to our lexicon of popular catch phrases: "American carnage" and "alternative facts." Regarding the latter, sales of George Orwell's famous book, "1984", wherein one discovers the phrase "alternative facts", have increased 10 thousand percent, in a single week—ten thousand percent. Phenomenal as that is, it of course pales in comparison to the unprecedented scope and scale of the Women's March that took place a week ago **Saturday**, totaling some 4 million plus people worldwide—including my dearly beloved--at some 1200+ locations around the world, 600+ in the United States, including Main St. Kennebunk where it is estimated some 700 people gathered. This is said to be the largest event of its kind, ever—nationally and internationally—an event which incredibly included 1 in every 100 Americans. On a different note, most unsettlingly, you may have heard that the Doomsday Clock—the international gauge judging the likelihood of global nuclear annihilation—ticked closer to self-destruction than it has been since the height of the Cold War, 1953. It is now at 2.5 minutes until midnight. A change from three minutes a week ago (gee, I wonder what caused that?). On a much lighter note there is the not so small matter of the Pats becoming Super Bowl bound! Which needless to say is a truly catastrophic occurrence for my Packer-backer-cheesehead-friends in WI., but praise God, I'm in New England now!

Admittedly I'm just scratching the surface—it's been that kind of a week. A week that has led me to wonder if perhaps I shouldn't leave you alone ever again. Be that as it may, depending upon one's ideological and political persuasions, all that has been and all that now is could be summarized in biblical fashion under the headings of either blessings or woes. Or, as is indicative of the complexity of the world, easily a rather significant splash of both.

I'm wondering if we don't also hear both in today's Lesson from the evangelist Matthew, what is the preamble to the Sermon on the Mount, commonly known as the Beatitudes, Latin for blessings. Though identified as blessings...I wonder do most people truly hear blessings? I mean, they don't exactly sound like blessings.

People have struggled to understand, or is it come to terms with, this oddball list of so-called blessings since day one. Beatitudes, by whatever name in the First Century, were not a new thing. Teachers of whatever ilk

commonly offered commonsense sayings in concise form to aid memory in a mostly illiterate day and age. Short sayings shared conventional wisdom, and in the sharing of such wisdom blessings were shared and spread and received. An example of this today might be, "Blessed are those on a strict low-fat diet, for they will have healthy arteries and live a long life." Commonsense. Good to know. No one is going to argue with that. "Give me such blessings," we say.

And yet it is here things get complicated. A colleague in ministry chimes in here: "It's common for me to hear from 'strong Christians' statements such as this, "I've been really blessed with good health, so I still get out and play a lot of golf." So in other words he states, 'Blessed are those who wear silly pants whilst whacking little balls across the grass.' As if that kind of thinking is a biggie with God. He then concludes, 'I get the impression that Jesus uses the word 'blessed' a little differently than the average American.'" And, let's face it, we're all average Americans here. I for example am guilty of the following: "I'm blessed that I can go to spinning class at my gym twice a week because come spring I'll be able to ride my bicycle really, really fast like a twenty-something." That's a great blessing...isn't it? Actually should you ever take a moment to look up a dictionary definition you're likely to discover that the very first definition listed uses words like "consecrated, sacred, holy," which no doubt would sound very odd to most Americans because such a blessing from God is more about being used by God than it is about getting lots and lots of really cool junk. Who knew?

So about now we start suspecting that when Jesus uses the word 'blessing' he isn't talking about getting lots and lots of really cool junk. We know this because his so-called conventional common sense sayings are anything but conventional and common sense. I mean, then and now, who associates blessing with being poor, or those who grieve, or those who are weak and exercise no power, or those at the receiving end of persecution, or those who others despise? For sure, regarding Jesus' sayings, common sense has altogether gone missing. Which leads us to ponder the question, maybe God offers us something far superior to common sense; and wouldn't that be some kind of special blessing? But then Jesus does toss out a few sayings a tad more easily swallowed: i.e., blessed are those who endeavor for justice, those who are spiritually clean, those who go around making peace happen—still, even these sound like a heck of a lot of work and since when do most of us consider having such huge tasks set before us—like being responsible for world peace--a blessing? I mean there are golf courses and spinning classes to get to, to say nothing of healthy meals to enjoy.

At this point I could say something like, well, maybe something has been lost in translation. Because "blessing" could read "honored"...as in, honored are...but then, since when are the poor honored? And which one of us honors them? Or in some of your Bibles you might read "happy" as in happy

are the poor...but really? Happy poor people? I'm not sure I've met those people. I'm not convinced that jives. And if the headlines of this past week are any indication the poor seem to suddenly be all the more unhappy—feeling all the less blessed by those in positions to bless, which happens to saddens me beyond anything I can describe. Yet another translation for “blessing” is the word we find in French Canadian Bibles, “debonair”. Debonair are the poor...meaning apparently, the poor are hip, are in vogue, are fashionable? But again I say, “Really Jesus?” Since when is destitution and all the suffering that accompanies it fashionable? Of course, regarding “debonair” there could be an exception or two. For example, peacemakers; peacemakers are kinda cool, kinda hip, kinda debonair. Think Gandhi, think King. These are very cool guys in my book! But still, fashionable peacemakers notwithstanding, taken as a whole, I remain unconvinced that we truly comprehend our Jesus' uncommon, unconventional blessings. And I include myself in that number.

So, in our mutual ignorance, stand back with me a moment, setting aside our confusion over Jesus' peculiar Beatitudes. Though we may not understand them do we not understand the need for them? I would say so! They are needed surely because there unquestionably is grand injustice in the world, much that is horrible, unconscionable—there is evil all about, evil that hurts people profoundly, often times lethally, every moment of every day. To put it mildly, the God I know, love and worship is not happy with this arrangement; therefore the God I know, love and worship seems to be forever and day talking about blessings, which as God knows, is an effective counter-punch sure to land squarely on evil's ungainly jaw.

A couple days ago I went trotting over to the Biddeford Walmart to pick up some cheap vitamin C—do you realize how much cheaper it is there than at the health food stores? While in the parking lot I happened upon one of those vehicles where the entire back is plastered with bumper stickers (I've never figured out why people do that to themselves). Anyway, one of them read: “Evil will always win because good is dumb”. Now somehow, I can't imagine why, but somehow that resonated with me. And when something resonates I then live with it awhile, and in living with it a while—actually just a few minutes—I came up with the following thoughts: First I immediately realized how counter such a statement is to my Christian faith which reinforces the opposite message, which of course is the Message of Easter—that good is more powerful than evil and that in the end goodness will always prove victorious. But I realize there is theology and then there is the real world. So, if in our day-to-day experiences there is some truth in that, that good is dumb, I asked myself “Why is that so?” I entertained two possibilities. Perhaps because good being good it finds it difficult to comprehend the full scope and scale of evil's lusts and perversions, so it is often taken by surprise. I think so. Or this, perhaps because good is

hopelessly overconfident in the persuasiveness of goodness—as if good believe goodness is self-evident to everyone all the time, so that it tends to rest on its laurels to a dangerous degree. I think so.

What I do know for sure is that real blessings are really necessary; and the best part is that it is possible to come off looking debonair in the process of bestowing them. Really necessary because of the tsunami of forces ever-working against God, against goodness; really necessary because, at an alarmingly increasing rate, the poor keep increasing along with the persecuted, the discriminated, the stereotyped, the huddling masses yearning to be free.

And in response I'm starting to believe that whatever Jesus means by blessing that I possess some of it precisely because I possess some measure of compassion, because I possess some measure of commitment to goodness sake, and that in fact, I possess a bleeding liberal heart that bleeds and bleeds. So yes, in the parlance of today's lesson, I think I now understand, bleeding notwithstanding, that this means I'm blessed. I'm blessed because my heart isn't a lump of coal; I'm blessed because true empathy lies at my core; I'm blessed because I have the unique capacity to shed a tear for a complete stranger; I'm also blessed because I am blessed, because I have the potential to be an agent of change for the positive in the world. I'm blessed because, thanks be to God, in my possession is everything necessary to be a blessing to others. And my friends, that is the same blessing our Christian faith can pull off in anyone of us... and does, time and time again!

Praise be to the God of blessings and Amen.