

Blessed Are

This past Tuesday was yet another State of the Union address by our president.

And as I sat there listening to it, with this week's three readings all rolling around in my brain, I began to fantasize.

I began to fantasize that the president started his state of the union speech by reminding the American public that we are, historically and culturally, rooted in the Judeo-Christian traditions and faiths.

He reminds those listening in to his speech that we are a nation of church-goers, a nation of believers in God — that our trust in God is so profound we even imprint it on our coins and dollar bills!

And therefore, because we take faith in God so seriously, he has determined that the United States shall, starting this very day, unilaterally disarm, dissolve the military, bringing all troops home from overseas, the money will be redirected to building schools and roads and he will see to it that we give 10% of our Gross Domestic Product to the poor of the world, while at the same time opening our borders for any who wish to enter.

And my daydreams weren't over quite yet.

I began wondering once again what the world might look like today if our born again President Bush had gotten up on that pile of rocks at ground zero on September 12 and announced that we, as a nation, forgive those who caused this disaster — he tells the world that we shall not retaliate — we shall endure the suffering without returning suffering in exchange....

Now, what do you think will happen to a president who says and does such things, whether he be Barak Obama or George Bush, democrat or republican?

Will they be hailed as faith-filled leaders and heroes or will they be immediately impeached, perhaps even hauled away to the pupule house?

What do you think?

Our faith invites us to enter a kingdom, the kingdom of God, a kingdom that is even now invading this world, a kingdom most folks will tell you, doesn't exist.

But it does exist; and it's so very different from the world we try to create.

It's a world, as one fellow puts it, where "down is the new up!"

Did you hear of the discussion between the Archbishop of Canterbury and an actor, when the Archbishop asked:

"Why do you actors seem to make such impressions on your audiences while we preachers leave our congregations cold?"

To which the actor replied:

"Well your Eminence, actors speak of things imaginary as if they were real, while you preachers speak of things real as if they were imaginary."

In some ways, it's like one of our immigrant families who ended up sleeping in the park in a tent last week because they didn't understand that their landlord was willing to let them stay in their apartment even though they owe some \$30,000 in back rent.

They thought, they mis-thought, they misunderstood the true nature of their situation, and relying on their best thinking, left the warmth of the home for a tent and a tree in the park, because they could not fathom that someone owed so much might still extend hospitality and kindness even in the face of such debt.

When I think of our militarized, fragmented, divided and contentious world, I wonder if we are all something like that family: running from the sure embrace of God, closing our eyes to God's kingdom, because we just can't bring ourselves to believe it's true.

Jesus, God in the flesh, comes to us and lives the life he calls us to live.

He doesn't engage in violence.

He trusts absolutely in the faithfulness of God.

He neither fights nor flees, but rather, he endures; he dies; and on the third day is raised again, the first born of the dead: the promise of what awaits us all if only we will tag along....

And yet, it is so hard.....

The beatitudes define this problem.

No other teaching by Jesus is more sentimentalized, crocheted into pillows, sugar coated and given lip service than the sermon on the mount.

And yet, these words are the very spine of the gospel.

People often wonder, what is Christianity all about?

What does Christian living look like?

The answer is right here.

It looks like the beatitudes, it looks like the sermon on the mount.

The beatitudes are the upside down blessings we heard today.

The sermon on the mount extends these blessings with admonitions that are equally strange, equally true.

And so it is in the sermon on the mount where Jesus oddly tells us we need to love our enemies, to do good to those who harm us, to give the shirt too when the coat is taken.

“In a word’, Jesus says, ‘Grow up. You are Kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives towards you.”

Mt 5:48 (The Message Tr.)

The sermon on the mount is the constitution of the Christian faith.

It is the central principal around which we, the church, exist.

It insists upon God’s preference for the poor, the wounded, the lost and the outcast.

This insistence is a devastating departure from the way our Monday through Saturday society organizes itself.

Throughout the world today, we have a whole different set of beatitudes.

Blessed are the shrewd, they shall succeed.

Blessed are the strong, they shall rule.

Blessed are those who help themselves, for God will help them too.

Blessed are those with money, they shall not burden others.

Blessed are the famous, they are admired by all.

Blessed are you when people speak well of you and praise you, you will never embarrass your family or friends.

Our way praises life on our terms; life we pretend to control.

Jesus praises life on God's terms; a life God controls.

Poverty, meekness and mourning bring us face to face with Reality – with a capital “R.”

The Reality that we are all in this life together, that none of us gets out of this life alive, and that all we have during this life is not deserved or something to which I am entitled, but is a free gift from the God who creates all there is.

So much of our daily discourse is about holding onto what's “mine” or looking out for my inner circle.

God, in Jesus, does not go there.

God, in Jesus, in fact, goes in the opposite direction.

Our way separates us from one another.

God's way unites us.

The beatitudes tell the truth about our condition, that “across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end.” H. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 86.

The constant challenge we all of us face, every day, is shall we admire Jesus, or shall we follow Him?

If we admire him, we can hold tight to the world's beatitudes, while tipping our hat to the lovely but hopelessly unreasonable beatitudes of Jesus.

Yet, in abandoning the radical call of Jesus to follow him, we abandon Jesus as well.

Just as a nation's constitution requires the consent and cooperation of the governed, so the beatitudes can only be lived out in a community that will take the leap of faith.

A leap of faith rooted in the conviction that "meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will prevail, and that God's future will be a time of mercy, not cruelty." 8 New Inter Bible, 181.

The beatitudes of Jesus are not a list of tasks or requirements.

They instead describe how a people, gathered around Jesus, seek to live.

My daughter asked the other day if, when people die, can they choose to go to heaven.

I told her I thought everyone is welcome in heaven, but many may choose not to go, since in heaven, the beatitudes of Jesus are lived out, not the beatitudes of America.

Paul picks up on this new creation in his letter today to the people at Corinth.

Corinth was a town created for and settled by freed slaves.

By the time Paul gets there, it is a town becoming, as we say today, gentrified.

Lots of new start up businesses, lots of up and coming folks, and a divide that grows ever greater between those with and those without.

So Paul today reminds these many upper class and middle class folk of God's choice to reveal himself in weakness, in need, in poverty.

And more, he uproots the blossoming weed of trust in self and plants, in no uncertain terms, the foolishness of the cross.

"Where is your God?"

"He is there, hanging from the tree."

And he does more.

Paul sees the “Body of Christ” as something alive in this world.

He sees it as something like an energy field created by participating in the Holy Spirit of Christ.

Or as St. Augustine puts it,

“The church consists in the state of communion of *the whole world.*”

Those who live in communion and love, made possible by God, are the church, wherever they are.

They are the yeast, the salt, the light, that changes the world.

For Paul, you don't live in the world and go to church.

For Paul, you live in the Church and go to the world.

Take off your head, shake it out a few times and put it back on; because that's not the way any of us are trained to think.

Church, for Paul, is not something you attend.

Church is something you are — or not!

It is more an organism than an organization.

You don't join it as much as you breathe it.

This is who you are.

This is who ***we*** are.

So blessed are you poor, you meek, you who mourn, you who make peace.

Your vulnerability creates an open hand, and only an open hand can receive the gifts of God.

+amen