

Matthew 5:1-20

When I want to distinguish between what Jesus taught and what Paul taught, I often say that Jesus walked around talking to people about the kingdom of God, while Paul told people what the death of Jesus meant. It's a handy distinction. And in the Beatitudes I do think we have an important distillation of Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God. He teaches here that the kingdom of God can be a present reality and sometimes IS a present reality. The kingdom of God is also something to look forward to in the future—an eschatological reality. The kingdom of God is what happens when we live rightly with one another.

“Blessed are those” is hard to translate. The authorities say that “blessed” is too religious, with connotations of reward vs. punishment. Sometimes translators use “happy” instead—“happy are those who”—but that's too emotional; Jesus doesn't mean you'll feel cheerful. Maybe it'd be closer to say “God's favor is upon those who”, although it's a little clunky. So: God's favor is upon the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. This is both-and: there's some sense of a reward for those conditions, but just as much, they are blessed conditions to be in. And the reason they're blessed conditions to be in is that they create foretastes of the kingdom.

So for instance: “Blessed are those who mourn.” Mourners are those who grieve at the state of the world. They see the way the world should be and are pained by it not being that way. God's favor rests upon them in the sense that they can tell things are not as they should be; they know what would be better because they have this connection to God's vision.

“Blessed are the merciful.” Mercy is open-handedness, kindness, an attitude about how one interacts with neighbors. Perhaps there is some reward for being merciful, but more important, it is its own state of favor. When you have a generous heart, you create within and around yourself a condition of blessedness.

“Blessed are the meek”—this is an echo of Psalm 37, which says that the meek, rather than the wicked, will inherit the land. It’s not a case of being self-effacing or submissive; it’s that Hebrew notion of *anavah*, taking up the space in the world that is rightly yours, and not taking up the space that is not rightly yours. If you are living rightly with people, you are sharing: and thus, the land, the earth, is available to you as you need it. The meek inherit the earth by sharing and being shared with.

In verse 11, Jesus switches from “blessed are those” to “blessed are *you*.” Specifically, blessed are you when people persecute you and revile you “on my account.” So Jesus knows that doing this kingdom work, however blessed, also gets you in trouble. It’ll get him in trouble; it’ll get his followers in trouble. It’s always gotten people in trouble; this is consistent with the experiences of the prophets, whom Jesus says he has come to fulfil, not to abolish. But that doesn’t mean we should all hide; on the contrary, we are salt and light, meant to make our presence known. Jesus has painted a picture of the qualities of God’s kingdom, both as it is partially realized and in its fullness. He has acknowledged the severity of the resistance to God’s kingdom. And now he tells his followers that in their *anavah*, in the taking up of their appropriate space and role in the world, they will be effectors of the kingdom.

Here is what interests me. I hear Jesus saying that the kingdom is brought more fully into being when people are themselves, when they do not shrink from taking up the space that

is theirs to take up. AND it is brought more fully into being when people are kind and appreciative of others.

Recently some parents sent a petition to the Van Meter school district, demanding that the curriculum exclude acknowledgement of trans and gay/lesbian people. You and I know that way too many teenagers attempt suicide because they feel that who they are is not welcome or right. The curriculum includes things like a story problem about a trans girl named Melissa and another story problem about a man and his husband, but the Van Meter voters who signed this petition see it is an insidious effort at indoctrinating innocent children. I think they're wrong, and I think they're probably being unnecessarily encouraged in their fears by people with political agendas, but I bring it up because it's an instance in which people find it very difficult, even distressing, to let others take up their own space in the world. How do we live out the Beatitudes here?

Last month the *Washington Post* published an article about a Cedar Rapids trans boy who refuses to choose between his identity and his Christianity. He went through the usual experience of church homophobia, but his mother says she realized if their family was going to heal from that, they needed God more, not less. So his mother has helped the family pray and have complex discussions about faith, as they were not able to do at church.

A few years ago for Pride, Sid (the boy) planned a story hour at the library with a drag queen. His mother, who cuts hair, had a customer tell her she planned to boycott the library because of this event. Here's what Jess, Sid's mother, says:

Worshiping at home had led Jess to believe that division was not the way forward for the country. And so, as Jess listened to the woman, she asked God to give her peace and strength. When the woman sat for her cut, Jess tried to convey empathy.

“I told her, ‘I’m here to have an open conversation where you can express your feelings and I can maybe share some of the details behind the event,’” Jess said.

The woman talked for a while, then Jess explained that the drag queen wouldn’t be doing anything sexual. She’d be dressed as a princess in a long pink skirt. She’d read the princess book, and that would be it.

“By the end, the woman was like, ‘Thank you so much for taking the time to explain this to me,’” Jess said. “It was this beautiful moment where I just spoke truth but also said, ‘I respect your opinion.’ She’s still a client.”ⁱ

Boom. There you go. Jess carried the grace of God’s kingdom into this conversation, and it was contagious. There are no guarantees, of course, but I *can* guarantee that if she’d not been gracious, the outcome would not have had the flavor of the kingdom.

But that’s not all. That was the Beatitudes part, where this follower of Jesus enacted the qualities of the kingdom. But there’s a salt and light part too. Sid literally says of his mother, “I feel like that’s your favorite word. She always wants to give people light.”

He laughed, but the truth was that he also longed to bring light to people the world had forgotten or pushed away. In June, he’d become an ambassador for Beloved Arise, the LGBTQ Christian group he found on TikTok. He planned to start a book club for young queer Christians.

He does get requests for help from other teenagers online. To one girl whose parents told her she’d go to hell for wanting to marry her girlfriend, Sid wrote

a verse from the book of Romans.

“I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow — not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love.”

Sid cut and pasted the verse into an email, then he typed a few of his own words.

“God has your back every step of your journey,” he told the young woman. “He still loves you. He’s still sustaining you.”

This boy is practicing *anavah*, taking up the space in the world that is rightfully his. He is being himself. AND he is making it visible, like light on a lampstand—flavorful, like salt in an unseasoned dish. The thing about both light and salt is that even a very small bit of it—say, a one-person amount of light or salt—is enough to make a discernible difference. That turn his mother took, when being rejected by the church made her realize they needed more God, not less God—that was pure Sermon on the Mount. They were being persecuted for who they were, but Jesus wants you to show up exactly as yourself. Jesus wants other people to show up exactly as themselves, and for us to be perfectly fine about it. Doing that makes the kingdom more evident in our time and place.

The great rabbi Hillel, who lived around the time of Jesus, said, “If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, who am I? and if not now, when?” You have to be loyal to that light within you and not hide it, you can’t attend *only* to yourself; *and* we have to actually do the kingdom in this lifetime, because now is the time we have.

Loving God, your son Jesus taught many things that helped people know how deeply you love humanity. Help us to live in your love, so that we might be beacons of light for others. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/12/23/trans-christian-iowa-sid-high/>