

*The Beatitudes, Jen Norton*

# From Despair to Hope

## The Transforming Words of the Beatitudes

BY BETH HERRINTON-HODGE

As I write these words on the eve of the Senate impeachment trial, I feel helpless as a citizen and as a Christian. I watch political representatives doing back-flips to support party-line maneuverings. I question whether the rule of law, the rules of common decency and the arc of justice can hold steady in the face of power-mongering and manipulation. Regardless of one's political leanings, there is plenty of wrangling on display. It's disheartening, fearsome and distressing.

My mind turns to a memorized line from the Heidelberg Catechism: "What is your only comfort, in life and death? That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>

As a Christian—believing in, following and belonging to Christ Jesus as Lord—I find comfort and calling in Matthew's account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, specifically in the blessings he declares upon his followers. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12) offer a vision and promise of the already-but-not-yet reality of the kingdom of God that Jesus ushered in and continues to preside over, even in challenging days and times. These are words of promise, words of hope, words of transformation for those who follow Christ.

### The Audience and the Blessing

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus declares the Beatitudes to his disciples as words of hope and promise that ultimately transform the now and future church. At this point in Jesus' ministry, as Matthew tells it, only four disciples have been called by Jesus (Matt. 4:18–22). Matthew uses a broader definition of "disciple" in his Gospel. For him, disciples aren't just the 12 whom Jesus formally called, but rather, followers of Jesus—whether Jew or Gentile—who believe in the Lordship of Christ. Thus, Jesus pronounces blessing upon the disciples—the followers of Jesus, the church. The Beatitudes are given as a result of God's divine act of sending Jesus and initiating the coming of the kingdom of God.

The Beatitudes comprise the first words in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, heading a collection of declarations and teachings intended for the faithful disciples in Matthew's community of faith. The gathered crowd overhears Jesus' words, but his message is for his disciples. Rather than commands or specific teachings, the words of the Beatitudes utilize "unconditional performative language."<sup>2</sup> Put another way, as a word names what already is (*Jesus' disciples are blessed*), it serves to bring into being the very reality it declares (*the blessed receive mercy*).

For example, a minister declares a couple as married. By this declaration, the couple lives into the marriage that has been declared. Similarly, a judge pronounces an accused person as guilty. From this point on, the person lives into the consequences of their guilt. The declaration gives rise to the existence that is declared. In the Beatitudes, the ones declared by Jesus as blessed live into the blessedness God gives them. They are thus transformed by God's blessing.

### Blessed as a Community

The Beatitudes are not unfamiliar to students of the Bible. Some of the first scriptures I was assigned to memorize for Sunday School were the Beatitudes, as found in Matthew's Gospel. Various versions of the Bible translate the opening word of each verse as "Blessed," which has its root in the Latin word *beatus*, meaning "blessed" or "happy."<sup>3</sup> Matthew writes the Beatitudes as declarative statements, stating what is already true. Because God sent Jesus into the world to bring about God's kingdom, Jesus' followers are blessed. What follows each named group who is blessed is a promise. Those who mourn will be comforted (5:4). Those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake receive the kingdom of heaven (5:10). These promises are sure and gave hope to those listening to Jesus at the time (and to those reading his words two thousand years later).

There are nine Beatitudes in these opening lines of Jesus' sermon. They stand as a unit, a unified whole, not to be read as individual blessings nor as practical advice for successful living. Instead, the whole of the Beatitudes declares





**Within the community of faith, there are those who are meek, those who mourn, those who work for peace. By their lives and witness, the Christian community is blessed. There will be comfort, peace and mercy for the community and within the community.**

God's blessing on the whole of the gathered disciples, and on the church, as we are engaged in life together. "They do not describe nine different kinds of good people who get into heaven, but are nine declarations about the blessedness . . . of the . . . community living in anticipation of God's reign."<sup>4</sup> Within the community of faith, there are those who are meek, those who mourn, those who work for peace. By their lives and witness, the Christian community is blessed. There will be comfort, peace and mercy for the community and within the community.

Although the Beatitudes aren't meant to be received as specific commands or teachings, they carry an ethical dimension. Those who are meek are declared blessed (5:5). Meekness as presented by Matthew represents a reversal of worldly ideals of kingship. Where a king is culturally celebrated as powerful, decisive and aggressive, meekness suggests humility, kindness and honor. Those who embody these qualities will inherit God's promised kingdom. Similarly, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6) are declared blessed.

A key concept for Matthew is righteousness, meaning to actively do the will of God.<sup>5</sup> Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness seek to do

God's work in the here and now and to make God's will known in the world. The blessed actively do the will of God. God will satisfy their longing—their hunger and thirst for God's will to be done. The blessing of such longing and action encourages disciples to reveal, by their actions, God's promise and hope to a world that knows separation from God.

### **Bearing Witness to Love**

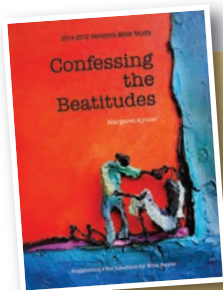
These examples bring me back to the distress I feel about the distance between what I witness and fear in today's world, and the vision of God's kingdom that Jesus embodies. Our Reformed faith asserts that all history points toward the kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup> As disciples, we join with Christ and with one another to work toward the transformation of culture. Christ commends us to labor within our own slices of history to carry out the work and will of God.<sup>7</sup> By this work, the kingdom of God is shown and known.

The words and message of the Beatitudes transform my despair to hope. As one blessed by God, my call and my response are to cling to and bear witness to the will of God for the world. God doesn't will my despair. God doesn't call disciples to throw up our hands and turn away. God desires that we join the throng of the faithful

in bearing witness to God's law of justice, decency, compassion, love and hope. God calls us to show the world something different from the chaos and brokenness that surround us. In so doing, there is movement toward the kingdom of God being known on earth.

As followers of Jesus and as blessed children of God, we belong to God. We are heirs to the promises named in the Beatitudes: God gives to God's people the kingdom of heaven; comfort; the promised land; righteousness on earth as it is in heaven; mercy; pure face-to-face encounters with God; peace; salvation; and ultimate reward. With these promises freely given, we cannot languish in despair—frozen by earthly powers and machinations beyond our hand. We belong to the God whose will bends toward justice, peace, mercy, law and love.

With hope, we move from our place of blessedness to act in God's world. We work for God's righteousness, justice and mercy in our own little slices of the world. We are confident that God, the divine actor, will prevail even as our actions seem small, fruitless or ineffective. The Beatitudes declare the truths of God's blessing. The blessed are moved to act in the world, living and modeling the transforming will of God.



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**by Margaret Aymer**

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## Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. Where do you recognize God's blessings within your community of faith?
2. Name persons or programs of your church community where you find:
  - a. poverty of spirit,
  - b. mourning,
  - c. meekness,
  - d. longing for righteousness,
  - e. mercy,
  - f. purity in heart,
  - g. peacemaking,
  - h. persecution because of keeping God's will,
  - i. revilement, persecution, false dealings because of faithfulness to Christ.
3. Where do you see God's blessing and transforming promises prevail in these instances?
4. In what ways do you know yourself as blessed?
5. As one blessed by God, how do you make known the reality/promises of God's kingdom in the here and now?
6. Cite instances when God has blessed you with hope, strength, direction, conviction or compulsion to show a

glimpse of God's kingdom through your life. What effect do your actions or words have?

7. How has God's world been transformed by the actions of Jesus' blessed disciples?
8. How has the church been transformed by Jesus' disciples?
9. Where are you called to work for transformation?

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## Notes

1. "The Heidelberg Catechism" in *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville, KY: Geneva, 1999), 4.001.
2. M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, "The Gospel According to Matthew" in *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 26.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. VIII, Leander E. Keck, editor (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 179.
6. Donald K. McKim, "The Mission of the Church in Society" in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, Donald K. McKim, editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 365.
7. Ibid.

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\*Sylvia Washer, "A Dream Called Presbyterian Women," *Horizons* (July/August, 1988), 3.