

The Real World
Rev. David Reynolds
Matthew 5: 1-12

To be honest with you, my first reaction, early in the week when I first read through the scripture lessons for today was, “Oh, my God, how am I supposed to deal with all the beatitudes in one twenty minute sermon?” I mean, not too long ago the Companions in Christ group finished up a nine week series just on the Beatitudes! In that format, we spend one week on each one! One week of readings and reflections and exercises each day, with a two-hour group session at the end! And now I’m asked to do all nine in twenty minutes?

There’s still part of me that feels that way, but as I began to read and study them again, I was reminded that they are all written in the indicative mood. These are not meant so much as prescriptions, or exhortations about how to live a moral life as they are descriptions of the way things really are in life. They are more along the lines of Walter Cronkite’s famous closing line of his newscast. “That’s the way it is.” So, rather than try to deal with each beatitude so much individually, I want to look at how taken together they are Jesus’ preaching about and description of the real world. Taken that way, they present very clearly the sometimes extremely difficult choice that living by Christian faith still is.

In the movie, *The Stuntman*, there is a scene in which Cameron tells Eli Cross what he learned in Vietnam. What he says he learned is: “If you want to get home for Thanksgiving, you better figure the guy coming at you is trying to kill you.” That’s a pretty good one line description of what we mean most of the time when we speak of the “real” world, isn’t it? At the end of the movie, Eli in turn tells Cameron that he’s been trying to convince him, that “There’s a better way of getting home for Thanksgiving.”

And so, here are the beatitudes: Are we right about the nature of the “real” world? Or, is Jesus right about the nature of the “real” world? That is the nitty-gritty choice of faith that we have to and do make every day in a thousand ways in our thinking and in our acting. In the Beatitudes, Jesus is preaching about the “real” world. He’s saying right along with Walter Cronkite, this “is the way it is.” Jesus knew what his disciples would face and were already facing. They’d literally left and so, lost everything they had, to follow him. They’d lost home and family, and I suspect were filled with grief over those losses. They were literally poor, and poor in spirit; at the end of their means, and at the end of their rope, often. They’d stepped off of any kind of career ladder, given up any kind of ambition, or any traditional aspirations of “making something of themselves.” They’d chosen instead, meekness by which the biblical word doesn’t mean a “doormat” like we often think of it; it just means not “self-seeking”, not “self-promoting.”

Jesus knew it would be hard for them to be merciful toward those who’d cut them off from family and community for the choice they’d made, maybe harder still to be merciful toward those who would actually persecute them and do them bodily harm. He knew he was asking a hard thing of them to be peaceful people, who advocated for the ways of peace, when everyone around them wanted to fight either them, or Rome. And yet, that was exactly what he’d asked them to do. In following him, they were in for all the hardships life could ever throw at them.

I was struck by the story in Thursday’s paper about the overturning of the manslaughter conviction in the death of 17 year-old Crystal Eavers in that car accident up on Resort Drive a year ago. I don’t know the Eavers, and I can only imagine the depth of grief and anguish they feel over the loss of their daughter. But, when I put myself in their shoes, I know that the loss of one of my children would be the very deepest grief I could ever feel, and

most likely an event I would never “get over.” Kathy Eavers’ words in the paper were so filled with pain. She said, “There’s not a day that goes by we don’t cry about her.” “Our life is over.” I’d say they qualify as “those who mourn.” I’d say they qualify as “the poor in spirit”, hanging on at the very end of their rope. I think they’d say that they have not received justice, but are rather, “hungering and thirsting” for it. They’re living in what we are likely to refer to as the “real world”, aren’t they, a long way from anywhere that feels like “home.”

What is the best way to get “home for Thanksgiving” in a world where such terrible, dangerous, and hurtful things can happen? According to Jesus in the Beatitudes “home”, our truest and deepest home, has already been defined by God. It has been written in us in creation. It is deeply within us in the way God made us and the way God made life in the earth. And so getting there has everything to do with living in the real world, the world as it really is in God’s making. So, listen again to Jesus’ description of that world in the Beatitudes.

You are blessed when you are poor, and poor in spirit because when there’s less of you, of your ego; (and, you see, all the ways we project ourselves onto the world, whether through our possessions or through our achievements are expansions of our ego) but, when there’s less of your ego, there’s more room for God. You’re blessed (and this is a hard one) when you are in mourning, when you’ve lost what is most dear to you, because then your ability to say “life has to mean what I say it means” is weakened. So that, at least then, you have the possibility of feeling the embracing arms of God who says, “even in hard times like this, life means what it always means. It means this: my arms around you, I love you.”

You’re blessed when you have no ambition, when you have given up the drive to “make something of yourself”, because then you can just be content with who God made you. Then, you not only are free to rejoice in and develop and share all the gifts God has given you, but as part of that receptiveness and contentedness, you receive and rejoice in all of the gifts of creation and of other people. That’s what it means that the meek inherit the earth.

You’re blessed when you hunger and thirst for righteousness, because true righteousness doesn’t come from the courts, or from any human institution, it comes from a loving God who would fill your hearts and fill the earth with Himself. You’re blessed when you can show mercy and care for the fragile life and dreams of others, because a heart vulnerable to them, is also vulnerable to the God who would give you a second chance and a new life. You’re blessed when you can get the way you see life turned around, which is what it means to be “pure in heart”. Literally that expression is translated “singleness of eye”; it’s a “seeing” with the heart. You’re blessed when you can get the way you see life turned around, because then you’ll see God everywhere in the world, and in everyone! You’re blessed when you’re persecuted because that persecution drives you deeper into God.

Home. Friends, the Beatitudes are Jesus’ description of what truly being home at Thanksgiving is. And they are the good news of a God who welcomes us into that home every day, every time we make the choice to stop living in what we call the “real” world, and live in the real world, life and the earth as God has created it. What I want us to see, and what I want to see by the grace of God, every day as I make the choices of my life, is what is implied by these two opposed visions of what the “real” world is. It’s this: what we mean when we talk about living in the “real” world assumes that at the heart of life is a void, deep, dark, nothingness, that we are always in danger of being swallowed by. What’s implied by Jesus in the Beatitudes is that in actuality what is at the heart of life is God and when we fall, what we fall into is the arms of God.

What is the best way to get home for Thanksgiving in a world where such terrible, and dangerous, and hurtful things happen? Says Jesus there is a better way than what we think the “school of hard knocks” has taught us. So, when I think of our response as Christians to the Eavers family, it’s not to scold them for not having faith in a God of love and mercy and new beginnings, because that is not what God is doing. It is merely to put our arms around them, and continue to cry with them in their loss and hurt, because that is what God is doing. But, it’s also to put our arms around the young man, Keith Griffin, who caused the accident and affirm God’s forgiveness of him, and God’s hope for the rest of his life.

But, as we hear Jesus’ preaching in the Beatitudes, we also know that in the real world, in God’s world, the Eavers’ lives, despite what they say and feel, are not over. God would not let the death of their daughter be the last word for them. God would raise them up, even in their grief and give them new life. There’s not nothingness there, there’s God there. And God would not have Keith Griffin crippled by guilt for the rest of his life; he offers him mercy and new life as well.

There’s not the nothingness of being swallowed up in either internal or external punishment for the rest of his life, there’s God’s mercy there. Friends, that’s the real world. Not the fear and the threat of nothingness, but a loving God always in the center of it. Can you live your life and adjust your thinking and your “seeing” every day on the basis of that reality? That’s the choice of faith Jesus presents. And when we make that choice, says Jesus, we’ll know God’s deep blessing at every turn.

