
Strange Blessings and a Man Named Arthur

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C**

Some of the liveliest Bible studies I have ever experienced took place on the so-called “locked ward” of the psychiatric hospital where I worked shortly after finishing seminary. As chaplain to the infamous Unit 1A, I led a twice weekly Faith and Life group in which participants were asked to “draw upon the resources of their diverse spiritual traditions to support mind-body wholeness in compliance with their treatment plans.” None of us was too sure what the heck this meant, but we took it as license to pray, read scripture, and sing gospel songs at the top of our lungs until the people next door asked us to stop.

I will never forget the afternoon we discussed the Beatitudes. I began reading the same passage from Luke’s gospel that we’ve just heard this morning. As I reached the end of the first verse, there was a rumbling at the back of the room. Arthur, an older gentleman who snoozed through most of our sessions, had suddenly come to attention. *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.* Arthur cocked his head with interest. *Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.* “All right,” said Arthur (The hospital’s food was notoriously bad). *Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.* *Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.* “Wow!” exclaimed Arthur, gaining steam. By the time I got to the phrase *Rejoice in that day and leap for joy*, that was exactly what Arthur was doing. Rising out of his chair, he paraded among the other patients, triumphantly proclaiming, “I’m blessed! I’m blessed! Did you know that I’m blessed?”

Never before had I witnessed such a reaction to the Beatitudes. In churches like ours, the response to this morning’s gospel tends to be either boredom (*The Beatitudes again? Didn’t we just hear those?*) or defensiveness (*Oh, yeah, here we go, bringing money and politics into church, when everybody knows Christianity is spiritual! Didn’t Jesus actually say, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’?* That’s Matthew’s version, in case you were wondering).

How we hear the Beatitudes, someone once said, has a lot to do with where we’re sitting. If, like Arthur, we’re sitting in an orange colored plastic chair in a psychiatric hospital wearing threadbare pajamas and wondering whether any of our family will come pick us up when we’re discharged to go home—if this is our situation, then Jesus’ words probably sound pretty good. If, on the other hand, we get to spend our days behind a massive mahogany desk, controlling assets that could sustain a small nation for decades and returning each evening to a home filled with warmth and acceptance—if this is our situation, then Jesus’ words may feel just a tad bit threatening.

My guess is, most of us sitting here this morning receive the Beatitudes as pretty strange news. Think for a moment about how weird these words really do sound, how absolutely foreign to our conventional way of thinking: *Blessed are you who are poor . . . Blessed are you who are hungry . . .* If Jesus appeared in Atlanta tomorrow, he might rephrase these sentences so they sounded something like this:

Blessed are you who do not get invitations to all the best parties, who, in fact, spend Valentine’s Day, and even Thanksgiving and Christmas, alone. Blessed are you!

Blessed are you who work for the CDC and aren’t sure you’re how much longer you’re going to have a job.

Blessed are you who refused to look at screenshots of an upcoming physics test someone took while the teacher was out of the room and, as a result, you got one of the lowest grades in the class. Blessed are you!

Blessed are you who are afraid to send your children to school because they may come home to find their parents deported.

Then, of course, there would be some “woe-i-tides” as well:

Woe to you whose portfolios are fat, who are young and beautiful, or who got into your first choice school, because you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who cheered just a little too loudly for the Eagles in the Super Bowl, because next year, the Falcons really will rise up!

How we hear the Beatitudes depends a lot on where we're sitting. Regardless, though, one thing bears saying, and that is this: At their heart, the Beatitudes are not threats, but invitations. The Beatitudes are not threats, but invitations. Invitations to embrace some great truths about life that I suspect most of us know instinctively but are often afraid to trust. Truths like the one Jesus spoke to a man who was concerned about his inheritance: “Be on guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. It is possible to be both very rich and very unhappy. It is also possible to be poor, alone, sick, and oppressed and yet still know peace and joy. Profound sorrow and tribulation do not always defeat people or make them bitter. There are individuals—and groups, and nations—who are like the tree described in this morning's reading from Jeremiah: because they put their trust in God, in the year of drought, they are not anxious, nor do they cease to bear fruit. So far from being withered by their trials, they end up, after many tears and sleepless night and even threat of outright destruction—so far from being withered by their trials, they end up actually drawing strength from them and then using that strength to help ease the burdens of others. There are people like this; I know, because some of them are members of this parish.

This is bizarre news in our culture, where we tend to do everything possible to avoid weakness, brokenness, and suffering, and where the average person's feelings about their own mortality are probably close to those of Woody Allen, when he said: “I'm not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens.” The Beatitudes expose this line of thought for the trap that it is. They remind us that the extent to which we try to hide behind the false security of money, power, success, even health and longevity—the extent to which we try to protect ourselves from the pain of being human, both our own pain and that of our neighbors—this will be the extent to which we may miss out on some of the joy of being part of God's Kingdom, the joy of being part of God's magnificent dream for our world. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” Jesus said, “it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Emily Dickenson put it another way, noting: “A death blow is a life blow to some/Who, till they died, did not alive become; Who, had they lived, had died/but when/They died, vitality begun.”

There are hidden treasures to mine out of our worst failures and losses. There are life-giving deaths to die. The Beatitudes are an invitation to each of us to begin to die just a little bit. To bet the farm that the Gospel's promises are true—that our God is a God whose strength is made perfect in weakness, a God from whom nothing, not even death, can ever separate us.

Now about my old friend Arthur . . . You know, there are many “locked wards” in our world, places where human pain, fear, and disappointment are shut away, lest they interfere with the cultural gods of power, fame, and fortune, lest they wreak havoc with our own fragile egos. There are many “locked wards” in our world, and not all their inhabitants wear hospital gowns and attend Faith and Life groups. Jesus' words to those who know well their frailty and mortality, those who have suffered the death of all they hold dear yet still dare to hope in the God whom the grave could not hold—Jesus' words to all of those remain, *Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you when all seems lost. Blessed are you.* May God give us grace to claim this blessing. Amen.