

Matthew 5:1-12

"The Impossible Ideal . . . The Necessity of Grace"

Though Jesus spent at least three years of his life preaching to the people of his day, few of his sermons were recorded for us. That is why the passage that we call the Sermon on the Mount, probably a gathering of many sermons, is so valuable to his modern day disciples. And the jewel of that passage is what we call "The Beatitudes". Billy Graham once said that in them we find the Lord's own character set side by side with his examples.

As one who has spent most of my ministry in a pastoral care setting and therefore finding myself leading many funerals and memorial services, I have always wondered why the Beatitudes seem to be a favorite with so many people for this occasion. But after studying the passage more closely this week, I think I understand why.

One thing I realized is that the Beatitudes, which by the way means "God's blessings" are not written in the imperative. They are not commands for what we should do. I think in my mind whenever I read these words I felt like God was telling me that I HAD to be meek, I HAD to be mournful, I HAD to thirst for righteousness and so on. And doing all of these things seems like an impossible ideal.

But spending time in God's words this week, I understand now that God gives us these words as promises and not commands. Jesus' words tell us that, though life may be difficult, those who faithfully endure while looking forward to that life that is to come will be blessed with comfort, satisfaction, mercy, a portion of the God's kingdom and an eternity in God's presence. So The Beatitudes are really a way of God showing us the necessity of grace. Because we could never hope to have these gifts, left to our own devices. They are surely free gifts from God.

Having said all that, there is no way that I can preach on all of the Beatitudes in one sermon. I have always assumed that Nazareth worships at 10:30 so we can beat the Baptists to lunch. Well friends, if I preach from this whole passage this morning, that just ain't gonna' happen! So I decided to concentrate on the one verse that I felt was most important for our society, our nation and in all honesty, the one I needed to hear from the most.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

At first glance, we don't really know if this peace means that we are to make "Shalom" the Hebrew word for peace that means wholeness; if we are to seek inner peace; or if we are to make peace with others as in, the opposite of war or conflict. But Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message* helped me clarify that it means the last interpretation. Listen to his words:

"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family." I believe, as God's ambassadors in God's world today, we are called to focus on what holds us together when life threaten us and not that which tears us apart.

With these thoughts in mind, how can we be peacemakers today? Our world is not peaceful. We are closer together than we have ever been, because of technology, yet we are farther apart because technology now allows us to disregard the need for human relationship. Our nation is not peaceful. Although we have survived what is probably the most contentious national election, at least in modern history, we remain divided. And how many of us feel true peace in our hearts, our families, our schools, our neighborhoods or even if our churches?

So is being a peacemaker just an impossible ideal? Jesus would say NO! Jesus' words are an invitation to imagine what the world would or could be if we place our trust in God's

ability to enhance our gifts as peacemakers by God's grace. And in order to make this ideal a reality, there are a few things as God's disciples that we can, no that we **MUST** do.

First, we can speak a word of peace in a world of conflict. When my daughter Katie was about 5, we were coming home from church one Sunday and I happened to glance in the rear view mirror at her. I could see her little eyebrows furrowed together and it was obvious that she was deep in thought. I waited patiently and finally she asked, “Mom, when do I get to start doing to those others what they did to me?”

I can only assume that her Sunday School lesson that morning had been from the passage of Scripture that we Christians call “the Golden rule”. Do to others as you would *have them* do to you. But in all honesty, many of us have probably had the same thought as Katie did. It is the way that the human mind works. We want to repay the way we have **BEEN** paid. We like to plan conversations in our mind where we tell them a thing or two. We want revenge.

A peacemaker finds a way to speak your own truth without judging another's truth. We find a way to say that, although we don't agree politically or doctrinally or philosophically, we can still love and respect one another despite our different views. We can say I don't agree but let's learn to live together anyway in the earth that we have been gifted.

That may sound a bit over simplistic, but I do believe that peacemaking, like love or patience or joy or any other fruit of the Spirit begins with one heart, one mind and one action. Next Sunday we will help our Youth celebrate the Souper Bowl of Caring. Youth all over America will take up money at the end of church to battle hunger and poverty in their communities. But do any of you know how the whole movement started? With **ONE** prayer.

In 1990, a seminary intern at Spring Valley Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC named Brad Smith, prayed this prayer: “Lord, even as we enjoy the Super Bowl football game, help us

be mindful of those who are without a bowl of soup to eat.” The Senior High youth of that church took that thought and ran with it, asking other churches in their area to join them in raising money for the hungry and hurting. Since then, young people across the country have helped generate over \$110 million dollars for the needy. And next week, we here at Nazareth will have the opportunity to contribute to this worthy project.

So we must believe that, just as one prayer can bring hope to millions of people, so one word of peace spoken in the midst of conflict really can lead to peace in our world.

Which leads to another characteristic needed to be a peacemaker. We must be hopeful. We must believe that God is sovereign, in control even when the world seems to have gone mad. Even when children go to bed hungry and nations live in war and people don't have adequate housing and our schools are not always safe. And we must not only believe that God is in control but we must live as if we believe it. Someone once said, "We may not know what the future holds but we know who holds the future."

I am sure many of you heard the story of hope that came out of the horrific avalanche in Italy last week that killed 29 people. Yet, *five days* after the avalanche and amid the continued frenzied and frantic search for survivors, rescue workers found the faintest glint of hope: three playful puppies hidden beneath the rubble. The sheepdog puppies apparently survived in an air pocket in a hotel beneath the masses of snow for five days. One exhausted firefighter told a reporter, "this is an important sign of life, which gives us hope."

So as God's disciples in our world today, we are called to seek hope and share it whenever we can as a way of bringing peace to others' lives and even to our world. But perhaps the most important part of being a peacemaker is that we are called to have compassion.

The compassion of a peacemaker does not simply feel sorry for someone. We call that pity. Compassion isn't telling someone that we may understand what they are going through. That is called empathy. Compassion means understanding that your neighbor shares humanity with you. (1) Compassion cuts across all barriers of age, race, gender nationality, sexuality, language, status or human condition to say that we are all destined to live by the same ideals and receive the same gifts of grace.

There is an organization called Second Wind Dreams® that we worked with when I served at Presbyterian Community that truly understands compassion. It is an international, nonprofit organization dedicated to changing the perception of aging through the fulfillment of dreams. Miss Gertrude was a 96 year old retired school teacher who lived at Presbyterian Community. She was actually the Band Director at Easley High School for so many years that, near the end of her life, some of her students were also living at the community. Though she suffered from dementia there were two things that always brought her back to the present – Scripture and music.

Through the Second Wind Dreams program, a group of staff members arranged for Miss Gertrude to attend a band practice at Easley High School just a couple of years before her death. Her dementia was well advanced at this time. Her wheelchair was placed in front of the students with all of their instruments and she directed them through the playing of the National Anthem and the Easley High Alma Mater.

If this didn't bring a tear to every eye in the place, what happened next did. These young people, sensing what an important moment this was in the life of Miss Gertrude, completely without prompting, came off of the stage and one by one went by her, introduced themselves, told her what instrument they played and the hugged and thanked

her. They understood that compassion means saying "Even though you are old your life still has meaning and you have not been forgotten." I dare say that their actions brought peace to every heart that witnessed this event and could bring peace to anyone in the world that would take the time to hear this story.

So friends, let us all strive to be peacemakers by speaking words of peace in conflict, by holding on to hope in a world full of despair and by showing compassion to all of God's children. After all being a peacemaker is an action, not a result. Perhaps that is why Jesus said, shortly before his death, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Go in peace. Go make peace. For we are all called children of God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(1) Henri Nouwen, With Open Hands, New York: Ballentine, 1972, pg. 86.