

Getting to Know Jesus, the Christ

July 13, 2014

Reflections on the Beatitudes

**Ps 119:105-112 and Matthew 5:3-7
(79, 96, 581, 624)**

I was speaking with a woman last night at a reception and the topic turned, as it often does in these situations, to church.

She had been born and raised Catholic,
returned to an Anglican church after years away,
and eventually switched to a Pentecostal church,
because her husband found the Anglicans too Catholic.
What was most important to her was that her daughter
get a moral upbringing,
that she learned right from wrong.

That was her primary motivation for going to church.
Now that her daughter is grown and living in Ontario,
she has nothing to do with the church.
She's not against it particularly.
It just doesn't fit into her busy schedule.

I've found that attitude towards the church
very common in our contemporary urban society.

Go to church for the kids,
to give them a solid foundation in the knowledge of good and evil.

In a lot of ways,
it's how Brentwood Presbyterian started back in the 1950s.
There were a number of neighbourhood Presbyterian churches built back then.

Brentwood is the last one standing.

All the others have closed.

But we began as a Sunday School.

Get the kids into Sunday School, the thinking went in those days,
and you'll get their parents into church.

And Sunday Schools were big in those days.

I went to one that had over 100 kids in it.

When I was baptized, there were 21 of us done that day.

The Sunday School here at Brentwood grew to about 30,
when the membership here was about 70, the highest it ever grew.

Christian morality, as we understood it then,
was considered to be essential to good education and citizenship.

But what about now – 50 or 60 years later?

How do we deal with and pass on Christian morality?

How do we witness to the appropriate response to God's grace
as we grow to understand the witness and work of Jesus Christ?

How willing are we to be confronted by
the profound challenge to our ways of thinking and acting
that come from the prophetic tradition
that shapes Jesus' moral teachings
about life in the Commonwealth of God?

What I've come to realize in those 50 years for me
is that Christian morality draws and pushes you
far beyond the conventional comfort zone of goodness
that I remember from my Sunday School days.

If we are to respond gratefully to God's radical grace in Jesus Christ –
and that's what Christian morality is,
a grateful response to God's grace –
then we will because radically critical
of many of North America's social standards and conventions.
We will introduce yet again a prophetic imagination
into the conversations about how we live well with each other.

The moral teachings of Jesus had that impact in his society.
They challenged its standards and conventions.
He constantly referred back to the prophetic tradition in Judaism
as a profound influence on what he thought was good and right
in the way people related to God, each other, and themselves.
It's Jesus summary of that morality that we find in the Beatitudes.

Jesus' structures this summary of his morality
as a series of blessings.

The blessings are associated with God's rule,
with the Commonwealth (what Jesus calls 'the Kingdom') of God,
meaning the way God would like to see human relationships work.
Jesus is calling on his followers to bring God's energy of blessing
into their world by practicing right relationships
with God, others, and themselves.

The idea of 'blessing' is a crucial concept in Judaism,
the religious tradition and community that Jesus is reforming.

The Greek word used in the Beatitudes is *markarios*,
meaning 'blessed' or 'happy.'

These 'blessings' or 'gifts of happiness'
are given by God to enable and equip us to participate
in the mission of the Commonwealth of God.

Being of that kind of service to the world
is where we will find true and lasting happiness.
Living into and out of the morality of the Beatitudes is how we will flourish.

So, the Beatitudes are both gift and obligation,
with the obligation arising out of gratitude for the gift
and flowing into full and flourishing life.

But that flourishing involves a radical reversal
of the expectations that dominated conventional Jewish morality in Jesus' day.

It is those who are gentle rather than aggressive,
those who value simplicity rather than a complicated sophistication,
those who mourn the loss of God's perspective rather than ignore it,
those who seek faithful gratitude rather than easy obedience,
who are truly blessed so they can be blessings.

In the humility Jesus is advocating here,
there is a desire to learn constantly and afresh
just what it is that God is doing to bless of our lives in community.

There is a desire, sown by the Holy Spirit,
to explore in community what best serves the Commonwealth of God
in any given situation.

Christian morality, as taught here by Jesus,
does not involve the imposition of a static set of preordained rules on every situation.

It invites us to consider together how best to live together
in the blessed happiness and contentment of the Commonwealth of God,
loving God, each other, and ourselves.

This is true for the relationships we have with our spouses,
our families, our friends, our colleagues at work,
in our church, our communities, our volunteering, our voting, and our consuming.

Every dimension of our lives is blessed by God
so we can act in it as a blessing for others and ourselves.

That's the prophetic challenge this text confronts us with this morning.
It's takes Christian morality back to its foundation in the Commonwealth of God.

May God's grace empower us to be grateful and faithful in our response.