

## **Bless My Soul**

Beatitudes of Promise, Creative Communications for the Parish

*"Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying: 'Blessed are ....'" Matthew 5:1-3a*

**Bless my soul!** Have you ever said that? It used to be a common expression, but not so much anymore. It was said to show surprise, not in the sense of being startled, but an expression of joy at the unexpected. Your long lost cousin shows up on your doorstep and in joy and surprise you say, "Well, bless my soul!" You're in debt and can't pay the bills when news reaches you that Uncle Harry died and left you his estate. "Bless my soul!" you say in happy relief.

**To be blessed is to be happy.** It's to be filled with joy. It is the attitude of one who has been redeemed and forgiven looking forward to the joys of heaven. Blessedness is a constant theme in our faith life. That is why so many of our hymns use the word "Blessed" or "Blessing" or some other form of the word. Happiness is worth singing about! We all want a blessed soul; we all want to be happy. The Beatitudes tell us how to achieve that.

**"Beatitude"** is a Latin form of the word that means "blessed" or "happy." In the Beatitudes Jesus lists eight conditions for happiness. If these eight conditions describe you and your life, then you will be happy, rejoicing, singing, and praising God all the way to heaven!

So what are these eight conditions? All you need to be blissfully happy forever is to:

- be poor in spirit,
- to mourn
- be meek
- hunger and thirst for righteousness
- be merciful,
- be pure in heart
- be a peacemaker
- be persecuted for righteousness' sake.

That's the secret of happiness? That sounds more like the road to misery! I wonder if that's what the people on the hillside were thinking when Jesus first spoke these words! Everywhere he went he preached the good news of the kingdom. And then to show that the kingdom had arrived in him, he healed the sick. He cured epileptics and lepers. He cast out demons. He fed the hungry. He gave sight to the blind.

"No doubt about it!" the people were thinking. "This is the Messiah, the One we've been waiting for. He's everything we need. With Jesus as our king, our troubles are over; we'll be fat and happy forever." They were looking for **happiness** like you and I look for happiness. A magazine in the checkout lane has headlines like: "Six easy steps to a perfect body," "four mutual funds you need in your portfolio," "five desserts that will win his heart," "the three hottest convertibles." The not-so-subtle message is that if you have a perfect body, or the right investments, or a great dessert, or a snazzy car, you'll be happy.

Even our founding fathers thought this way. Remember those words you had to memorize in the Declaration of Independence: "**that among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness**"? That's not what the first draft said. Originally it said, "life, liberty and property." But happiness sounded a bit loftier. So "property" was cut and "happiness" added. Clearly, the founders thought that property and happiness were the same thing.

**But Jesus thought and taught differently.** He said that happiness is connected to things that seem totally unrelated, even exactly the opposite, things we don't like at all. To be poor in spirit is to be happy? To mourn is to be happy? To be persecuted and insulted is to be happy?

You've experienced the **death** of loved ones; parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, close friends. Mourning is not pleasant. It hurts! It feels terrible! The pain in one's heart can seem unbearable! Yes, our assurance is that those who die in faith are with their Lord, but we still cry. We miss them so. Life is never the same without them.

And who wants to be **meek** nowadays? What recent movie have you seen that depicted a meek person as happy? The hero or heroine is a karate-chopping, machine-gun-toting, foul-mouthed warrior. TV ads feature body-building equipment promising a powerful physique. Fashion tells us we need to wear power ties, eat power bars, and drive power cars. The idea is to intimidate, to overpower the customer or the competition, to do whatever it takes to win. Be meek? Come on, Jesus!

And forget **persecution**, especially for righteousness. One by one, service organizations, clubs and religious groups are surrendering their values and beliefs to avoid lawsuits or losing their tax

exempt status. Beliefs and values are important unless they cost you money or members. As the price rises, beliefs and values tend to drop these days.

But as we run for the exit, **Jesus stands firm**. He says to all who will listen, "to be blessed, to be supremely happy, to be a child of God and behold his face--these are the values you must have; these are the conditions you must meet."

Some will say, "Okay, Jesus, I'll try. I'll take you and your word seriously." So, throughout church history there have been a few who tried harder and paid a much dearer price than most.

- There were Peter and Paul and the rest of the Apostles, most of whom were martyred. There were thousands of early Christians who lost home and limb and life for the name of Jesus, caring for the less fortunate as they did.
- There were Pilgrim Fathers who ventured across the ocean, most of whom failed to make it through the first New England winter, that they might serve God according to conscience.
- In our own day, there have been heroes of faith whose lives seem to mirror the very words of Jesus we read here, such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Yet sincere as these heroes of faith were, all of them would say, "I have fallen short. I'm only a beggar telling others where to find bread."

Yet we still love the **Beatitudes**. We commit them to memory. We hang them on the Sunday school wall. We do them in needle point. We put them on greeting cards. Even though they condemn us, unless.... Unless what? Unless we see them not as Law but as Gospel. Despite the beauty of their poetry, the Beatitudes are a death sentence if we see them as Law, rules that bind us, standards that we have to meet in order to please God. But they aren't Law. The Beatitudes are a portrait in words of Jesus. They picture him. In him, they take on flesh.

Let me share with you a little secret about how businesses and government sometimes recruit workers. They have a job they want filled. They already know who they want to fill it. So they develop a job description and list of qualifications that only one person in the whole world fits. Potential applicants look at the job description and the qualifications; they see they don't meet the criteria, so they don't even apply. Or they do, and they are rejected. But the one candidate who's the perfect match applies and he's hired.

**Jesus is the perfect match for the Beatitudes.** The crowd on the hillside hears the Beatitudes and they say, "Beautiful words, but they leave me out." The saints who went before us say, "Beautiful words, but even I don't fit." You and I read these words and say, "That's impossible!" Then we all look to Jesus and say, "Why, it's him! He's poor in spirit. He mourns for me in my sin and guilt. He meekly suffers and dies for me. He is merciful toward the poor and sick and downtrodden. He alone is pure in heart. He is the peacemaker, turning away God's anger at my sin, bringing me back to God. He's the one who was persecuted for righteousness' sake! It's Jesus!"

When we see it this way, Beatitudes that could have become bad news become wonderful news! By faith in Jesus Christ, his perfect fit with all that's required here is considered ours. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, "*All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*" Baptized into Christ, God no longer sees our shortcomings; he sees his perfect Son; poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungry and thirsting for righteousness, the peacemaker, persecuted.

And what do we do when we figure it out? We trust him as our Savior. We profess our faith in and allegiance to Him. We rejoice in the blessedness, the happiness that is ours as a free gift of faith. We join in the procession that welcomes our King on Palm Sunday, singing the praises of him who makes us citizens of the kingdom of heaven despite our failures. We sing, "**Hosanna to the Son of David!** Blessed, happy, is he, who comes in the name of the Lord!" Jesus is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. And because of Him, because of what He did, we are blessed..