(Recited by memory, with understatement…) 

Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 
Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted. 
Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth. 
Blessed are those who hunger & thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled. 
Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will receive mercy. 
Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God. 
Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God. 
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.¹

I have a vivid memory of the first seminary class I took with Russell Haitch, Professor of Christian Education and Director of the Institute for Ministry with Youth and Young Adults at Bethany Seminary. I had never met Russell before, and I did not know what to expect from him in the classroom. Or at least that is what I would have told you before the class began. But when Russell came in, and without preamble stood at the front of our classroom and, with an understated and soft voice, recited the Beatitudes to us from memory, I realized that I did have some expectations. And Russell matched none of them.

I was reminded of my first impression upon meeting Russell last week, as we began a four week focus on the Beatitudes in our worship life together here, and Dan Ulrich, another one of my Bethany professors, was bringing greetings from the seminary. I say that Russell matched none of my expectations, but that is not entirely true. I expected my Bethany professors to be competent and compelling, and Russell certainly fit that bill. I expected them to be people of deep faith and committed both to their vocation of teaching and to us as their students. Again, Russell was (and is) a prime example of the best of those expectations.

But I must admit that I had developed a whole host of expectations of what a director of an Institute for Ministry with Youth and Young Adults would look and act like. Or I should probably more accurately say that I had absorbed a certain range of stereotypes that are associated with people who work with youth and young adults that I had unconsciously applied to Russell before I had met him. You know the kind of things I am talking about – youth workers are high

¹ Matthew 5:3-10 (NRSV)
energy types, extroverts as a rule, really into pop culture and media, and most likely have some variety of personal "cool" going for them.

So to say that Russell did not meet these expectations in that first impression is a bit of an understatement in itself. He basically tipped these stereotypes of mine on their head. If I had to choose one word to characterize my first impression of Russell that day, it would be a word from those beatitudes that he recited to our class – meek. And meekness is not typically a word associated with youth ministry or youth and young adult ministers.

Which, of course, begs the question – why isn’t it?

One of my favorite scenes in Monty Python’s classic movie Life of Brian, comes when the film’s namesake Brian Cohen and his mother are in attendance at the original Sermon on the Mount. Because they are so far back in the crowd, they are having difficulty hearing exactly what Jesus is saying, and they are bandying about with some others in the crowd about exactly what they think they are hearing:

What was that? I can't hear a thing.
I think it was 'Blessed are the cheesemakers.'
What’s so special about the cheesemakers?
Well, obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.
You hear that? Blessed are the Greek.
The Greek?
Mmm. Well, apparently, he's going to inherit the earth.
Did anyone catch his name?
Oh, it's the meek! Blessed are the meek! Oh, that's nice, isn't it? I'm glad they're getting something, 'cause they have a [heck] of a time.2

I love this scene. Admittedly, mostly because it is funny. But it also highlights just how uncommon and nonsensical are the teachings we know as the Beatitudes. Just as Russell Haitch did not fit into my preconceived notions of what a youth and young adult ministry specialist would be like, the Beatitudes are profoundly counterintuitive. They take the assumptions and expectations we have about blessedness and turn them upside down, almost to the point that they are nonsensical. The Greek – they are blessed – philosophy, culture, political success, at least for a time. But “Blessed are the meek?” The meek? Really? I don’t think so.

At its most basic, a beatitude is simply a statement in the indicative mood that declares certain people to be in a privileged position or in fortunate circumstances. The form is not actually unique to the sermon on the Mount – we find them elsewhere in scripture, especially in the Psalms. A few examples3: Psalm 1:1 – “Blessed is the [one] who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,” Psalm 40:4 – “Blessed is the [one] who makes the Lord his trust;” Psalm 106:3 – “Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right.”

But in these other examples from scripture, the beatitudes follow a basic logic – God’s blessing follows faithfulness; rewards follow righteousness. But in Matthew’s Beatitudes of Jesus that

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3 NIV.
formula is flipped. Things that are normally considered the opposite of blessing – poverty of spirit, grief, powerlessness, persecution – are stated as blessings. And that goes against all our expectations, almost everything we think we know about the way the world works.

And that is precisely the point. As commentator Matthew Myer Boulton has stated, “The trick here is to uncover what we routinely take for granted, the deep logic by which we often assume the world actually works. Jesus is saying, in effect: No. That is not how the world actually works, no matter how things may seem. On the contrary, as God has ordained the deep, emerging order of creation, the truly blessed are ultimately and actually the gentle, the merciful, the peacemakers, the poor. It appears to be otherwise, I understand – and that is precisely why I am beginning this way, the better to dispel the commonplace illustrations, to clarify reality, to declare the dawning reign of God, and so to help us find our bearings as we live into God’s future.”

It is in that interplay between the dawning reign of God and living into God’s future that we find the real sweet spot of blessing here. In seminary we called this kingdom logic the “already, but not yet.” Thus – the meek are already blessed, but they have not yet inherited the earth; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are already blessed, but they are not yet filled. As such the Beatitudes are clearly not imperatives as we often misrepresent them. They do not suggest that we should be meek, or that we should be persecuted. Rather, they are descriptive of that “already and not yet” Kingdom reality of which Jesus is proclaiming the advent. As Boulton writes “Rather than an ethics, the Beatitudes are more like a twofold…gift. First they mark out a map of divine blessing – a map strikingly different from the conventional one, which tends to identify “blessings” as positive goods, gifts, talents, and so on. By contrast, in the Beatitudes Jesus highlights not goods already granted but rather empty spaces, longings, hungers, and so on. In this way, his map is fundamentally eschatological – and therein lies the gifts second and decisive aspect. This map is also an encouraging promise, an atlas of “not yets”…refigured into sites of hope, foretastes of heaven.5

“Eschatological” is just a fancy word theologians use to describe the final destiny of humanity and the world. It refers to the end goal – that toward which all of human history is moving. For Jesus, the Kingdom is the promised land – the ultimate and final end goal of life. And the Kingdom is in the process of becoming a reality – it is already coming into being, but is not yet realized in full. It is both present in the lives of his followers, and yet to come in the future. And the Beatitudes articulate this reality in the sharpest terms possible. Most use two forms of the verb “to be”: “are” and “will.” Most begin in the present and move to the future. As Larry Bouchard states “Each beatitude expresses existential and communal tensions between will be and is….Ordinary expectations – for example, that ultimate value lies in political, economic, or personal power to “make things happen” – are reversed….6

That reversal seems to be key to understanding the Beatitudes of Jesus, but it is also difficult to fully grasp – a reality that I discovered when working on this sermon. I expected to find a plethora of preaching resources on these texts, being that they are some of the most beloved and often quoted scriptures in our tradition. What I discovered is that there aren’t nearly as many treatments of the Beatitudes as I expected. Apparently, the Beatitudes are better suited

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5 Ibid. pp. 78
for cross-stitchings and wall-hangings – or for stained glass windows such as those found at the seminary – than for sermons.

However, I was helpfully reminded in my preparations that these teachings of Jesus have a context. That statement may seem absurdly obvious, but given their quotability and stand-alone aesthetic and spiritual value, I must confess I have generally overlooked that context. As they are found in Matthew’s gospel, the Beatitudes are the preamble of Jesus’ address to a specific crowd that had gathered around him early in his ministry. He had not even called all of the twelve, but we are told he had been traveling throughout Galilee, teaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing diseases and sicknesses. And at the end of Matthew chapter 4, in verses 24 and 25, just before Jesus sits down on the mountaintop to deliver the Sermon on the Mount, we read this: “So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him…”

It is to this type of crowd that Jesus addresses the Beatitudes. That is important to remember, because this crowd is clearly not full of folks who have been feeling very "blessed" up to that point. Nor would anyone have expected to hear them referred to as such. In fact, the people who were flocking to Jesus were probably more illustrative of the quote from “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty – the “tired…poor…huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse…the homeless, [and the] tempest-tost.” These are the ones that Jesus calls blessed. And like the immigrants who arrive on our shores and find in this country a promised land of a fresh starts and new opportunities that are both already present and still waiting to be born into reality, the crowd to whom Jesus’ Beatitudes are addressed in Matthew is hearing a promise of just such an already and not yet reality of God’s Kingdom.

As some of you are aware, we have been focusing on the Sermon on the Mount this year in Children’s Worship. As part of that focus, we have challenged the kids to memorize the Beatitudes this year. To date, only a few have accomplished it – including Sofia, who is leading worship for us today, and Laney, who read the Beatitudes for us last week. But there is one phrase that almost all the children have had no trouble memorizing. (Any idea what it might be? I’ll give you a hint…it is introduced by “blessed are the meek”!) “…for they shall inherit the earth.” For the first several weeks, as we revisited and went over the beatitudes together each week, it didn’t matter who was blessed – they were all inheriting the earth!

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
…for they will inherit the earth!
Blessed are the peacemakers,
…for they will inherit the earth!
Blessed are the little children,
…for they will inherit the earth!
Blessed are the cockroaches,
…for they will inherit the earth!

You know, it occurs to me now, as silly as it may sound, that perhaps the kids got the central message of the Beatitudes a lot more quickly and concretely than I originally gave them credit. Because isn’t that what the Beatitudes are really about – our divine inheritance as beloved children of God. You know, almost all of the material in the Beatitudes is not original to Jesus.

7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_Colossus
The blessing for the meek comes directly from Psalm 37. And the blessing for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness originates in Psalm 107. So all Jesus is really doing is reminding the crowds of the deep promises of their tradition – the blessings that are already declared, but not yet fully realized. Jesus points to the horizon – to the promised land of God’s Kingdom – and says to that crowd, that huddled mass of desperate, empty handed, and empty hearted people – “You see that – that is your inheritance! You shall inherit the earth! Despite all evidence to the contrary, you are blessed – all of you – because you are already on the way and God is and will be with you every step of that way. You aren’t there yet, but you will be. And you will claim that inheritance.”

And so…

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

and

Blessed are those who hunger & thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

What more can we say than – Amen

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5 Psalm 37:11 – “But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity. (NRSV)
6 Psalm 107:9 – “For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.” (NRSV)