

“Today”
Matthew 5:1-12
13th Sunday after Pentecost

September 8, 2019
Westminster, Greenville
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I’ve been doing some thinking about THE FUTURE recently.

Now that I’ve been here a year, some of you have even asked me, “Ben, what do you see in Westminster’s future? What’s your vision for what our church might become?”

It’s a good question.

And I hope you won’t be disappointed when I say that I do not have a five-point plan to roll out for you this morning.

But that does NOT mean that I haven’t been thinking about our future.

I have.

I’ve been thinking about it a lot.

Any number of thoughts have crossed my mind.

When I think about our church’s future, I sometimes think about all the kids that we have around here. And all the teenagers coming to youth group. And how fortunate we are to have those young people and the growth that this church has experienced in recent years.

And I want to make sure that we are prepared for that growth to continue, that we are able—in terms of staff, in terms of ministries—that we are able to welcome and plug in all those who join this church, without losing connections to the long-time members who have helped build this church.

You know what else I like to think about when I consider our future?

I think about our rich history with mission, and how we can build on that history in our future.

I think about the word OPEN.

I think about the word ENERGETIC.

I think about the words RADICAL HOSPITALITY.

When it comes to our future, I want us to continue to be an open and energetic congregation that offers radical hospitality to all God's children.

I've got other thoughts about our future, but this isn't a sermon about my vision. This is a sermon about Jesus' vision. In our text for today, Jesus goes up on a mountain and presents HIS VISION for the future.

At least, I THINK he was talking about the future.

Jesus said:

"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."

Nine blessings.

We know them as the Beatitudes.

It's a beautiful picture that Jesus paints...and I'm assuming that he's talking about the future. As in, ONE DAY the meek will inherit the earth. As in, ONE DAY those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled.

Jesus is talking ONE DAY.

Don't you think?

Surely Jesus isn't talking about today—

a brutal war in Syria...no way Jesus means today;

largest refugee crisis since WWII...Jesus couldn't mean

today.

Do you think he's talking about today?

Did you know that some people think Jesus didn't mean tomorrow when he spoke these words...but TODAY?

The Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle is one of those.

He puts it like this:

“...the original language of the Beatitudes should not be rendered
as ‘Blessed are the peacemakers,’
or ‘Blessed are those who struggle for justice.’

“Greater precision in translation would say, ‘You’re in the right place
if...[you struggle for justice] or work for peace.’”

The Beatitudes is...GEOGRAPHY.
It tells us where to stand.”¹

I’ve got to admit, I like that.

The Beatitudes tell us we’re in the right place when we stand with the meek and the mourning. We’re in the right place when we’re on the side of the peacemakers and the pure in heart.

I like that, but now I feel conflicted.
Because Jesus is beginning to sound...
well, not like VISIONARY Jesus,
but like HARD & DEMANDING Jesus.

Like he’s trying to teach us something.

You see, there’s an argument that the Beatitudes are not about tomorrow, but ALL about today, because they introduce the Sermon on the Mount. And the Sermon on the Mount is about ETHICS.

You remember the Sermon on the Mount, right?

You have heard it said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”
But I say to you, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute
you...”

Piece of cake, right?
How many of you were planning to love your enemies today?

Or never mind our enemies.

¹ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, New York: Free Press, 2010.

How about loving a stranger?
 How about loving someone you don't know, weren't planning on knowing...but that's the very person God wants you to get to know?

It happened in a mainline church, not too different than ours.

They were all going around the room, telling why they enjoyed being part of that church. Some liked the fellowship, others liked the friends they had made, some liked the music.

“Part of me hates [this church],” one young woman said.
 “Before I joined this church, my life was my life. I was fairly content with myself.

“Then the church took me to Haiti and made me stand near people who are dying because of their poverty –yet who were also undeniably richer in faith than I would ever be.

“I could have had a fairly happy life without the church.
 Now, those strangers in Haiti have become my obsession.
 I'm thinking about them as if they were my family.

I've got the church to blame for that.”²

The church took me to Camp Thornwell...and had me work on behalf of children who have had an uphill battle their entire lives.

The church took me to the third floor of Westminster, on an Interfaith Housing week, to stand next to families who are experiencing homelessness so that they know they're not in this life alone.

The church took me to the Dominican Republic.
 The church took me to Cuba.

² As told by Will Willimon in his book, *Who Will Be Saved?*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.

The church took me to a Just Faith small group, and after a couple months of spiritual self-examination, I work with formerly incarcerated individuals who teach me as much as I give them.

The Beatitudes are geography.
They tell us where to stand.

All of which is fine and good, but it doesn't resolve the tension between tomorrow and today. Never mind the tension in the text.

How about the tension in our lives?

Church is not supposed to be a place that just DEMANDS things from us.
It's the place that is supposed to fill us.
To re-create us.
To remind us of our deepest identity as God's child.

And one never knows what shape that recreation will take, when someone walks through the sanctuary doors.

In one of my former congregations, a member came up to me after worship and said, "Please don't take offense when you see my husband sleeping through your sermons. He doesn't sleep well at night, and sometimes church is the ONLY place where he can get a good 20 minutes of rest!"

And I wasn't offended at all.

Didn't Jesus also say: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest..."??

So what do we do with this tension between tomorrow and today?
If you're anything like me, you want to get rid of the tension.
Resolve the tension. Throw the tension away.
But what if that very tension...is God's gift?

Prodding us, nudging us, keeping us from standing in the place where we say: I've got this following Jesus thing all figured out!

Years ago, a clergyperson wrote “It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth.”

And another member of the clergy issued a reply:

“It is...strangely irrational...that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time is neutral.

It can be used either destructively or constructively,
[for] ill will...[or for] good...”

Some of you may recognize the reply—it came from the pen of Martin Luther King, Jr., and was written while he sat in a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama over 50 years ago.

King said that what was most baffling to him was not the vitriol and hate of the white racist. It was the lukewarm response of the white moderate.

“We must use time creatively,” King went on, “*and forever realize that the time is always RIFE to do RIGHT...*”³

I’m beginning to think that Jesus meant today.
Do you think Jesus meant today?

Be careful...as soon as you say that Jesus meant today, you’ve got to deal with these verses:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake...”

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

³ “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” April 16, 1963, reproduced in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986.

Well...now I hope that Jesus did NOT mean today!

Because being persecuted for Jesus, being reviled for Jesus—this isn't part of my plan, my vision—not for today, not for tomorrow, not for the future of this church!

It sounds like Jesus is telling us to enter the fray, get into the battle, to stand on the side of the oppressed and the downtrodden...even if it costs us MORE THAN WE WANT TO PAY.

Like followers of Jesus are supposed to be ZEALOUS for the poor, are supposed CRAVE justice like food, like we can't survive without it...

Look—I grew up Presbyterian.
I'm a fan of moderation, not zealotry!

I don't know about you, but when I get home from church today, I'm planning on having a pretty MODERATE afternoon. Going to the grocery store. Hoping to catch a little football. Maybe even catch a nap.

And is that such a bad thing?
I bet I'm not alone.

See, there's this pretty large part of me that HOPES Jesus did not mean today, because TODAY puts demands on my time, my energy, my life. In fact, if Jesus meant today...here's the scary part—if Jesus meant today, that might not just inconvenience my life.

If the Beatitudes are about today...that could actually CHANGE my life.

The Presbyterian pastor Tom Are, who was one of Leigh's pastors growing up—he tells the following story of what happened in one of his former churches.

It was time for their stewardship campaign.

And the church decided that year that they would do one of those campaigns in which every member of the church receives a personal visit.

Every person or family—their name was written on a notecard.

And the notecards were set out for the stewardship team, and the elders who would make the visits were picking names, trying to find cards with the names of people they already knew.

Peter, one of the elders, was running late and got there late and got a name he didn't know.

It was Rebecca.

He asked Tom, his pastor, what he knew about Rebecca.

Tom said he didn't know Rebecca either, but Peter should still visit her.

So Peter goes to visit, pulls up to her house.

The yard is a mess.

Weeds everywhere, lawn needs mowing.

House was peeling paint.

It looked like nobody lived there.

He walks up, knocks on Rebecca's door.

The door opens, but only enough for Rebecca to see who's there.

"Yes?"

"Rebecca, I'm Peter, I'm from the church."

"I don't go to that church anymore."

"Yes, that's fine, but I just wanted to check and see how you're doing."

"I don't go there."

"Well, I just wanted to stop by."

"Thanks for coming."

And she closed the door, and Peter thought—well, Tom said to visit, he didn't say that I actually had to go inside.

The next day Peter's back at work. It was getting cold that time of year, and Peter was warming himself with a space heater he had in his office...and Peter couldn't get what he had seen the previous day out of his head.

You see, when Rebecca opened the door, with the chain on the door, just peering out at Peter—he noticed she was wearing a coat.

Not outside her house. Inside her house.

So he went by her house again after work.
Knocks on the door, she opens the door.

“It’s Peter.”

She looks at him: “You know you’ve already been here, right?
You don’t have that Alzheimer’s, do you?”

“No, no...but I’ve got a space heater with me. I was just wondering if you might like to use it?”

There was a LONG PAUSE.

“You reckon you can show me how to use it?” she said.

So Peter went inside.
Inside was no better than outside.

Rebecca was a hoarder.

But amidst all the junk, it was clear to Peter—from a couple things he saw—that in a previous life, Rebecca had been a dancer. Remnants of her old life were stacked in the house—and it was also clear than no one besides Rebecca had been in that house for years.

So Peter showed her how to use the heater.

And a couple days later, he was out buying groceries, and he found himself thinking about Rebecca...he bought more than he needed, and he drove to her place from the supermarket with a bag of groceries.

“Rebecca, it’s Peter.”

“You want your heater back?”

“No, I was, well...just at the store, picked up some extra things, thought you might want them.”

Peter said he found himself heading over to Rebecca's house every month or so. Never really decided to do it. Just found himself doing it. He cleaned up her yard, he tried to clean up the inside, she wouldn't let him do that.

This went on for a year and a half, and then one day, Rebecca died.
The church had a service for her.
No family there, only a handful of people...and Peter.

About two months later, Tom Are received a letter from the attorney who handled Rebecca's estate. The attorney said that he had received a postcard from Rebecca earlier that year.

The postcard directed that at the time of her death, any proceeds from her estate should go to the church, because, she wrote, "when everyone else had already done so, Peter—from that church—refused to leave me alone."

Inside the envelope was a check for \$1,742.

Tom Are said to Peter:
"You were the church to her."

Peter said:
"No, Tom. It's just that whenever I kept going back, it was as clear to me as it's ever been that Jesus was in that house."⁴

"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 the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

Do you think Jesus meant today?

I'm on the fence.

⁴ As told by the Rev. Tom Are in a sermon preached at the Bold Word preaching conference at Mo-Ranch, in Hunt, Texas, 2015.

See, I've got things to do today, so maybe I can get to this Beatitudes business tomorrow.

Or if not tomorrow, then next week.
Or if not next week, then next month.
Surely Jesus will understand.

I'm on the fence about the TIMING of all this...
The fence is not a bad place to be.
That's my favorite geographical location—the fence!

Staying on the fence allows me to consider the possibility that Jesus meant tomorrow or today, and I can decide depending on how I feel...

Should I forgive today?
Should I give generously today?
Should I inconvenience my life to make someone else's life better...today?
Should I carry someone else's cross...today?

I like to sit on the fence.

Problem is—what Jesus said right after the Beatitudes was this:

“You are the salt of the earth.”
“You are the light of the world.”

I HATE IT when Jesus tells me to get off the fence.

(Amen.)