

“Blessed Are Those”

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“Blessed are the poor in spirit...” begins Jesus in a sermon to his disciples. The Gospels of both Matthew (5:3-12) and Luke (6:20-23) record this opening blessing and many biblical scholars believe the Beatitudes, as they are known, to be the center point of the Sermon on the Mount itself. The Beatitudes are lovely sentiments, seen as proclamations by Jesus of the true nature and will of God.

“If we didn’t already know but were asked to guess the kind of people Jesus would pick out for special commendation,” writes Frederick Buechner in *Whistling in the Dark*, “we might be tempted to guess one sort or another of spiritual hero – men and women of impeccable credentials morally, spiritually, humanly, and every which way. If so, we would be wrong. Maybe those aren’t the one he picked out because he felt they didn’t need the shot in the arm this commendation would give them. Maybe they’re not the ones he picked out because he didn’t happen to know any. Be that as it may, it’s worth noting the ones he did pick out.” Many of us know the Beatitudes as the blessings Jesus offers upon those seen as lesser and lowly within society; those who have little power on earth, he declares shall gain a place of prominence within heaven.

But it is not often that Unitarian Universalists give the Beatitudes more than a cursory glance, if at all. What is it they actually say and what is their point? Are they relevant to any other than his ancient listeners? What can they teach us today, about ourselves, about faith, about living in community, about our spiritual obligations and experiences? The place where many Unitarian Universalists get caught up in Biblical text is how the passages have been translated. Yet, in recent biblical scholarship the

translation from the Aramaic language, believed to be the original language of the Bible, has helped open up previously difficult scripture passages. The Beatitudes is one such piece of text that has benefited from a reexamination of its original wording. Neil Douglas-Klotz has researched the Aramaic text of the Beatitudes and in his book, *Prayers of the Cosmos*; he offers several new possible translations of the Beatitudes that may help us to gain a greater understanding of their message, their purpose, and their importance.

The traditional translation of the Beatitudes reads:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they, which do hunger, and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

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

Blessed are they, which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Reads the first of the Beatitudes in the King James English translation. Buechner suggests that ‘poor in spirit’ speaks of those who have nothing to give and everything to receive. Klotz, on the other hand, offers that to be ‘poor in spirit’ is actually a “traditional idiom in Aramaic that translates to ‘humble.’” So he suggests that to be poor is closer to ones belief that they are lesser without said thing, that one would be lesser without their God. And if the word translated as ‘spirit’ was to be translated as ‘breath’ or ‘soul,’ (which are two possibilities) it could be read, that those who are of humble soul are blessed for they have accepted that they are not complete without the Holy. For they have come to understand themselves in direct connection to the power of the universe.

The second beatitude, “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted,” Buechner suggests represents that those who suffer often knowingly do so at their own hand, because of their own doing. Implying that those who despair and carry the burden of pain in their lives are spiritually less mature than those who do not allow suffering to be a burden to them. Klotz however, looking at the Aramaic, offers an alternative - that those who suffer do so in longing, deeply wishing for something, knowing themselves to be in need and that the comfort they shall receive is a unification in love with the Holy, for which they have, in fact, been longing. Klotz points out that those who suffer emotional turmoil, who are lost in their lives, shall be returned from their aimless wanderings to the comfort of God. Here we are reminded that even in our darkest hour we are not alone, that the Holy, by whatever name we call it, in whatever form we know it to be, is present with us.

“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.” Again, like ‘poor,’ ‘meek’ can be translated as ‘humble’ and also ‘gentle.’ Klotz writes it as “who has submitted or surrendered to God, or who has softened what is unnaturally hard within one.” One who is open to the presence of beauty and wonder in the world, one who is open to receiving strength from the “universal source and seeing God acting through all of nature, all earthiness,” as Klotz writes it. To be meek, to be gentle, to understand all that surrounds us is Holy and Sacred, to know that God is present to us through nature, that is what Jesus is holding up in this blessing.

“Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” Klotz writes, “‘righteousness,’ in Aramaic, refers to both an inner and an outer sense of justice, ...a perfection of natural stability.” It is the longing for justice for both self and others. It is the waiting for justice, an anticipation of something to come, the possibility that the future holds. ‘Hunger,’ Klotz writes is, “to long for strengthening of the physical being.” And ‘thirst,’ “a reestablishment of harmony.” That God will satisfy , and “surround by fruit.” This beatitude is not about those who are not righteous in themselves, as Beuchner suggests, but who see injustice to others as an injustice to themselves which must be put right. Here it is those who long for true justice, who seek nourishment in the waiting and anticipate the coming of sacred harmony that receive blessing.

The fifth beatitude speaks to mercy. “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.” Beuchner argues the blessing is not for those who have achieved great victories over evil in the world, but upon those who see in themselves evil and when they

see it in others are merciful. In Aramaic, ‘mercy’ can also be translated as ‘love,’ ‘compassion,’ or ‘pity.’ Klotz points out that the root of the word for mercy is ‘womb,’ the center from which love is born. This is a blessing of those who live their lives from a place of love rather than hatred and anger. It is in the extending of compassion that one is more likely to receive compassion in return. If not from other people, certainly from the Holy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.” Klotz writes about the image that emerges from the ancient text is one “of a flower blooming because that is its nature.” Buechner understands this to read that it is those who have maintained some innocence and “inner freshness” though they are not totally pure that shall receive blessing. But, ‘pure’ can also be interpreted as ‘consistent’ rather than ‘clean’ or ‘untainted.’ ‘In heart’ can be translated as “in love or sympathy.” So to be ‘pure in heart’ is more likely to be unflinching in one’s love for God and for others. ‘The word ‘heart’ can also be translated as ‘center from which all life radiates...it points to inner vision or contemplation.’ One who is unflinching in their love Klotz contends, shall know “the force...of the cosmos through the soul of every living thing.” It is by knowing oneself that one comes to understand the world and then is able to see the Holy in all life.

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” This speaks to those who are committed to action, claims Klotz. The image he uses is one of “planting and tilling, laboring, harvesting and celebrating.” It is the actions performed regularly, despite the odds, that gain blessing. Beuchner writes, “not the ones who have necessarily found peace in its fullness but the ones who, just for that reason, try to bring it

about wherever and however they can...” The word ‘peace’ is not only a sense of inner quiet and lack of violence, but “health and safety.” Where as the term ‘children’ Klotz writes, refers to “active production from that which was only potential before.” So it is the need and the commitment to again and again “plant the seeds of peace, nurture and care for those seeds to hasten the fulfillment of peace, which here is the divine will.”

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” ‘Persecuted’ can also be interpreted as “dominated, dislocated, and moved by shame or scandal.” Those who are shamed in their attempt to bring about justice (righteousness) within and beyond are blessed in their efforts. This is a reminder that though the journey toward justice for all is not easy, that “society does not tolerate well the prophetic spirit,” as Klotz writes, and yet he continues, “Consider adversity as an incitement to take another step” toward what is right.

“Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.” Again, the prophetic voice will come against those who wish to silence it. This is simply the truth of living your faith publicly, and yet you are blessed in your struggle.

“Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” Let this not stop you, for others have come before you and in their turn suffered such injustice. This is a call to hold onto the vision in the midst of despair and discouragement. Klotz writes, “It acknowledges that a certain amount of discouragement is natural and can be a reminder to turn within and renew before proceeding in the co-creation of heaven on and in earth.”

The Beatitudes are not only a series of blessings; they are also a call to action and intention, a reminder of the Truth of God. We need also remember that the Beatitudes are not given to the crowds that have gathered to hear Jesus, but to his disciples only. When he sees the gathered people he goes up a mountain and his disciples follow and then he offers his sermon. The beatitudes are as much a truth telling of what life will be like for his disciples as they are a command to stay true to the path. Jesus speaks to his followers, affirming their frailties and their fears, yet asks them to trust that God is with them and all will be worthwhile in the end. It is not just because they are no spiritual heroes, as Beuchner calls them, that Jesus offers them this blessing; but because he recognizes the reality that living a life of faith is not easy and will be met with hostility and resentment and callousness. But he reminds them that if they take the risk to live faithfully their religious truth, then their paths shall surely be blessed. It is not just because they are lacking or struggling, or are without elevated spiritual characteristics, that Jesus offers them blessing, but because they have left the only lives they have ever known to follow one who imparts to them what they have come to believe to be God's truth.

And so I read an alternative translation of the beatitudes and see if there is not something within them speaks to you.

King James: Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Aramaic: Tuned to the Source are those who live by breathing Unity; their "I can!" is included in God's.

King James: Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Aramaic: Blessed are those in emotional turmoil; they shall be united inside by love.

King James: Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Aramaic: Healthy are those who have softened what is rigid within; they shall receive physical vigor and strength from the universe.

King James: Blessed are they, which do hunger, and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Aramaic: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for physical justice; they shall be surrounded by what is needed to sustain their bodies.

King James: Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Aramaic: Blessed are those who, from their inner wombs, birth mercy; they shall feel its warm arms embrace them.

King James: Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Aramaic: Aligned with the One are those whose lives radiate from a core of love; they shall see God everywhere.

King James: Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Aramaic: Blessed are those who plant peace each season; they shall be named the children of God.

King James: Blessed are they, which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Aramaic: Blessings to those who are dislocated for the cause of justice; their new home is the province of the universe.

King James: Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

Aramaic: Renewal when you are reproached and driven away by the clamor of evil on all sides, for my sake.

King James: Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Aramaic: Then, do everything extreme, including letting your ego disappear, for this is the secret of claiming your expanded home in the universe. For so they shamed those before you: All who are enraptured, saying inspired things – who produce on the outside what the spirit has given them within.

To live out in the world that which our spirits create within, that is the true calling within the Beatitudes. That we need not be perfect in order to live a life of meaning and to receive the blessings of all that is Holy. That life is not simple or effortless, but it is worthwhile and in truth it is the only way to live. But for us Unitarian Universalists it is often even harder. For we have no clear path or creed or dogma that says “Here, this is how to live your best self out in the world.” So I offer you this, both a recognition and a calling...beatitudes of a sort, based on our seven principles:

Blessed are you who respect and honor our interconnectedness, you who work to preserve our planet: for you shall inherit the earth for the future.

Blessed are you who work for peace in the midst of strife and devastation: for you shall know the meaning of loving thy neighbor and receive love in return.

Blessed are you who, even when it’s painful and difficult, remain at the table of democracy to ensure the voice of all - both lowly and great, loud and quiet are heard equally: for you shall know the serenity of being heard and listening well.

Blessed are you who struggle for justice and equity for all peoples both known and unknown to you: for you shall know what a life of compassion is.

Blessed are you who seek to recognize the worth and dignity of all living things: for you shall know your own worth.

Blessed are you who search with diligence and conviction the truth of your soul and your heart, not daunted by doubt or despair: for you shall know the presence of the Holy.

Blessed are you all: for you are Sacred and Holy and Divine simply in your being.