

**Blessed Are.....**

February 2, 2014

Matthew 5:1-12

Alexander M. Sanders, Jr., is a former Chief Judge of the South Carolina Court of Appeals. When his daughter Zoe graduated from the University of South Carolina, he told this story that happened when she was just three years old.

Sanders came home from work one day to find his home — and especially his young daughter — in a state of turmoil. Zoe's pet turtle had died, and she was crying as if her heart would break.

Zoe's mother had been dealing with the situation all day and declared that it was now Dad's turn to try and make things better.

Although he was successful both as a lawyer and a politician, who confidently faced all kinds of complex issues and problems every day, this seemed out of his league.

The mysteries of life and death are difficult, if not impossible for the mature mind to fathom. The task of explaining them to a three-year-old was completely beyond either his confidence or experience. But he tried.

First, he told Zoe that they could go to the pet store and buy another one just like the one who had died. Even at three years old, Zoe was smart enough to know that a turtle is not a toy.

There's really no such thing as getting another one just like the one who died. And so Zoe's tears continued.

Desperate to quiet his little girl's tears, he said, 'I tell you what, we'll have a funeral for the turtle.' Being three years old, she didn't know what a funeral was. Scrambling to come up with an explanation — as well as something that would get her mind off the turtle's demise, he said, 'A funeral is like a birthday party.

We'll have ice cream and cake and lemonade and balloons, and all the children in the neighborhood will come over to our house to play. All because the turtle died.'

Well, the prospect of a turtle funeral did the trick. Instantly, Zoe was her happy, smiling self. The turtle's death was no longer cause for tears, but reason to rejoice

So, with visions of cake and ice cream in their heads the two beamed down on the deceased turtle lying at their feet. As they did, the turtle began to move.

And a few seconds later, he was crawling away as lively as — well, as lively as a turtle, but an undeniably LIVE turtle.

Then an even stranger thing happened. Sanders — a politician and a lawyer — was speechless. Zoe had no such problem.

After considering her options, she looked up at her father with her big beautiful eyes and — with all the innocence of her tender years — she said quietly, ‘Daddy, Let’s kill it.’”

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted

Zoe’s solution may have been a little off center, but her conclusion was right on.

She understood from her father that he was going to make everything all right; that her mourning would be turned to joy; that a celebration of laughter would make her forget her tears.

Through Jesus’ words, our Heavenly Father is telling us the same thing: He is going to make everything all right and restore our fortunes;

Our mourning will be turned to joy, and a celebration of laughter, greater than anything we could ever imagine, will make us forget all the sorrows we have experienced.

The message of the beatitudes is the message that the kingdom of God has overcome the kingdom of this world. A day of ultimate justice is coming when God will heal the wounds of our hearts and fill us with inexpressible joy.

The message of Jesus in the beatitudes is that eternity in the presence of God, what we call heaven, will more than make up for any problems we have had here.

Are you poor? You will inherit the kingdom of God. Are you hungry now? You will be satisfied Are you weeping now? You will laugh Are you being persecuted? Leap for joy, because you have a reward coming

Now, I want to say this morning that I believe many, many people misunderstand and misinterpret the beatitudes. They see them as imperatives, that is, commandments — attitudes of the heart that Christians should acquire - that we should be poor in spirit, hungry for righteousness, mournful over our sin, etc.

But I believe the beatitudes are not imperatives, they are indicatives. These are not new rules of morality that Jesus is commanding us to follow. These are simple statements of how life sometimes is.

Living in this world, we are sometimes poor - if not materially, we are poor in spirit — humiliated, shamed, rejected, downcast.

We are often hungry, if not for food, for reality, for the reign of justice and righteousness. We often weep, over our own condition and the condition of our families, as well as the rest of the human race.

But all of that is going to change. We are looking forward to a new day. Listen to these words from 2 Peter 3:10-13: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief.... You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God... in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

If we could put in terms of things people face today, we might say: “Blessed are those who are unemployed or facing a financial crisis. Blessed are those with marital difficulties. Blessed are those facing betrayal or living with divorce.

Blessed are those who are having difficulty with your children. Blessed are those who live with someone who constantly puts you down and gives you grief. Blessed are those who think that you just can’t take it anymore.

There is a new day coming A day of release. A day of joy. A day when you are loved more than you have ever been loved before.

A day when inferiority and insecurity will vanish like a bad dream that cannot be remembered. A day when you are fully provided for.

A day when ultimate meaning and purpose help you to see everything from God’s perspective. A day when injustice and unfairness has ended and you take your rightful place in the kingdom of joy that God has prepared for you.

We read in the book of Revelation these words: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new.’”

The point is that in spite of the way things may look, God has forever changed the configuration of the world.

God has turned the world upside down, and those who have suffered will rejoice.

And the opposite may well be true also. In a statement in juxtaposition to the beatitudes, Luke 6:25, Jesus said, “Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep”

And so that we don’t misunderstand, I don’t believe Jesus meant that being happy and having plenty are wrong in and of themselves.

I think he is pointing out the danger of letting material things become too important to us – so important that they block our submission to God and hinder our spiritual well-being.

In our culture we say, “Blessed are the millionaires, better yet, the billionaires.

Blessed are the famous, the beautiful, the brilliant. Blessed are the Paris Hilton’s, the Brad Pitt’s, the Tom Brady’s.”

Now, the truth is that they could be blessed, but so often success in the present world order blinds people to their need for God and the necessity of relying on Jesus Christ.

They could be blessed if they would allow the kingdom of God to come upon them. But in many cases it appears that perhaps wealth, fame and looks may not be blessing.

We have to say “may” because we really don’t know their hearts. But we can say that these things – wealth, fame, looks - are a curse whenever they keep someone from God.

Now, the Beatitudes are not teachings on how to be blessed. They are not instructions to do anything. They do not indicate conditions that are especially pleasing to God or good for human beings.

No one is actually being told that they are better off for being poor, for mourning, for being persecuted, and so on, or that the conditions listed are recommended ways to well-being before God or man. . . .

They are explanations and illustrations, drawn from the immediate availability of the kingdom through a personal relationship with Jesus.

They single out cases that provide proof that, in him, the rule of God from the heavens truly is available in life circumstances that are beyond all human hope.”

The condition of being poor, sorrowful, hungry or hated are not conditions that are good or laudable in themselves.

There have been plenty of people through the years who were poor, but who were more ungodly than many wealthy folk.

There are many who have been hungry, but who have lived sinful and selfish lives.

There are those who were in mourning who became bitter and resentful, and thereby missed being blessed.

There are those who were hated who hated back and took vengeance in their own hands.

They, too, missed the blessing, because the blessing is only found in a relationship with God. The blessing is found in trusting the realities of another kingdom — trusting in God and God's complete provision.

Blessed are those who are poor and live in a relationship with God, and look to God for their supply. Blessed are those who are hungry, who do not live by bread alone.

Blessed are those who are in mourning, who go to God for their comfort. Blessed are those who are persecuted, who leave justice to God and continue to live in love. These are blessed, says our Lord.

Making sacrifices or making yourself miserable is not a spiritual quality. We do not seek to be poor, hungry or in mourning. Paul says, "If I gave everything I have to poor people, and if I were burned alive for preaching the Gospel but didn't love others, it would be of no value whatever" (1 Corinthians 13:3, LB).

We've all heard or read stories about missionaries and others who have endured extreme hardships for the sake of Christ. The Mother Teresas of the world, if you will.

The reason that these folks were able to endure their hardships and often even face death, was that they had a relationship with Christ that carried them through, gave them strength and helped them to see that this world is not all there is.

They overcame because they were living in the kingdom of God in the present and looking forward to its fulfillment in the future. They were blessed.

At this stage of our lives, I would say it is highly unlikely that most of us here will be called to foreign mission fields. And I suspect that our lives will not be in danger because of our faith.

But we all face our own battlefields, whether they be problems with relationships, emotional problems, physical problems or a combination of them.

And nowhere does God promise or guarantee that if we follow and serve him we will be free from all difficulties in this life.

But we do have the promise of strength in this life and peace in the world to come.

Now, I do want to say that in my counseling and working with people over the years, I know how difficult it can be for someone who is really hurting physically or scarred emotionally to come to grips with this idea of blessing and comfort.

Christianity can sound almost polyannish to those who have never really experienced its reality.

But folks, I can tell you – it is real. God is for real, and so are his promises. And yes, it does take complete faith and trust.

We began using our new Presbyterian hymnal this morning. Lots of good music in there – both new and old. There is one older hymn that we used to sing a lot that is not in there - one called “Only Trust Him.”

It begins, “Come every soul by sin oppressed; there’s mercy with the Lord. And he will surely give you rest by trusting in his word. Only trust him.”

That’s what it all means. That’s what blessing is - not necessarily that we have material things or success as this world defines it, but that we have a relationship with Jesus Christ that will enable us to experience eternally what God has promised to those who love him.

Blessed are those who do trust God and believe that he means what he says.