

A Kingdom in a Stable (The Beatitudes, Part Two)

Tom Schmidt

The Old Meeting House, 15 December 2024

Last week, I began a two-part sermon on the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12), a series of statements about certain kinds and conditions of people that constitute Jesus' first words in his first sermon in the first Gospel. In this important context, he launches a surprising agenda where the people who are "blessed," or in favor with God, are those who get the shaft in this life, particularly, for identifying with him; these downtrodden people, Jesus declares, should have high hopes. I suggested that we are likely to feel uncomfortable with the idealized future that Jesus promises, whether it involves our world transformed or an afterlife, because we are so comfortable in *this* life. Also, as a kind of seasonal segue, I suggested that the message of the Beatitudes really begins with the Christmas story, when Mary uses Beatitude-like language, calling herself "lowly" and then "blessed" to be the mother of the Messiah, the one who will usher in this upside-down kingdom.

This week, we'll take a closer look at the eight conditions or qualities of people listed in the Beatitudes. I'm not going to ask how we can be like these people, because, generally, the Beatitudes don't recommend behaviors. You can't, for example, choose to mourn—somebody has to die—nor can you seek persecution—somebody has to hate you for your beliefs. If there is a behavior implied by the Beatitudes, it may be simply to appreciate why God exalts these kinds of people. French scholar Jacques Dupont, who wrote an 1100-page scholarly tome just on this little passage, summed it up in ten words: "the Beatitudes bring a revelation of the heart of God."

And what better way to look for the heart of God, this time of year, than to seek it in a stable. Earlier this fall, just as I was beginning to mull over the link between the Beatitudes and the Christmas story, I followed my GPS star from the East—East Montpelier, that is—to a humble garage sale where, lo! I found the manger, [holds up manger] and all the other ceramic figures, for just five bucks. I presented my gold—I don't think they accepted frankincense or myrrh—and then, so that you can behold these marvelous things—Wise Man that I am—I

brought this piece of plywood for a shelf, where I'll place the manger and figures one-by-one and talk about their importance, especially in relation to the Beatitudes.

I am intentionally setting a light tone, because the story is a joke. That is, it leads to a punchline, a "reveal" intended to surprise and delight us. Remember, today's Advent candle is for joy. But the joy, and the joke, is not the familiar stand-up comic form of humor. The punchline of the divine comedy, the triumphal moment of God, when love conquers all and the maiden captive in the tower—that's us—is set free, is the moment of the hero's death. Surprise! You and the disciples didn't see *that* coming, did you? But after a brief pause, there's Easter, whereby this surprising God confirms that it's okay to laugh with joy. Christmas is part of the setup, where we first see that appearances deceive, that size and power are relative, that the kingdom of God can fit inside a stable. Where do the Beatitudes fit in? They simply delineate the odd participants in God's upside-down kingdom. Thus, today's sermon title, "A Kingdom in a Stable."

Who do we find here? Who fits in this oddball kingdom? The first Beatitude proclaims, "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "Poor in spirit" is not about poverty, it's an allusion to "faint in spirit" from Isaiah 61, where the expression appears right next to "those who mourn" as it does here. Incidentally, the Isaiah passage (61:1-3) contains several other terms from the Beatitudes, serving for Jesus' audience as a familiar melody upon which he riffs his kingdom jazz. In Isaiah, the word "faint" modifying "spirit" means "feeble," as in a light almost extinguished. The only other place that the term "poor in spirit" occurs in contemporary writings is in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where it refers to those who are helpless before their foes. In all these texts, the situation of the "poor in spirit" is so dire that only God can rescue them. Who matches this description among the familiar figures in our manger scene? It must be Mary, who calls herself "lowly" at the Annunciation, whose pregnancy is plagued by suspicions, who is poor, who has just given birth in a dark stable. Of all those in the scene, she is the most vulnerable. And yet, when she learns that she will bear the Messiah, she sings joyfully to God, anticipating the fulfillment of promise. Here is the Advent candle of joy: a woman's flame, flickering but resilient, proclaiming the upside-down nature of God's kingdom. [places Mary figure in the creche]

According to Jesus' second Beatitude, those who mourn will be comforted—not *now*, in keeping with the context, but in God's kingdom. Mourning is, of course, part of everyone's experience at some point, including the haughty, war-makers, and persecutors, which suggests that the word here may have a narrower application. The background passage in Isaiah puts "mourn" right next to "faint in spirit" and alludes to those lost in Israel's conquest; a few verses later in the Gospel, Jesus describes the imminent danger to his disciples for following him. These observations suggest that mourning here is not about bereavement in general but about victimization, especially religious persecution. While there is no familiar manger scene figure who quite fits, I can't think of the little town of Bethlehem without remembering the village mothers who were about to mourn when Herod attempted to preserve his dynasty by killing all their children. Those babies died for the kingdom just as surely as did the victims of Israel's exile and the martyred apostles. When I bought an extra figure on craigslist that I wanted for the fifth beatitude, it came with an extra shepherd and an extra Mary [produces figure], but I was struck by the fact that the Mary figure came without a baby. This unnamed mother, bereft for Jesus' sake, is the blessed mourner in the scene. [places figure]

The third Beatitude is, "blessed are the meek." Simple enough. We all know what "meek" means, although, ironically, of all the qualities in the Beatitudes, it's the one we are taught from an early age not to emulate. "Stand up for yourself, fight for the cause, never back down." But not in the upside-down kingdom. The choice among the creche figures is easy: the shepherds [produces and places shepherd figure] They represent the lowest strata of society: outcasts from polite society, poor, nameless outdoor laborers who hang around with dirty sheep. They bring no gifts; they have nothing to give but their hearts. And yet, they are the only people in the entire Bible who get serenaded by a choir of angels.

The magi are my choice for those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness," the fourth Beatitude. [produces and places magi.] Like the shepherds, they were considered outcasts, but for a different reason. They were foreigners, probably from Babylon, which is now Iraq, and they dabbled in arcane arts like astrology—"magi" is the root of the word "magician"—practices condemned, on pain of death, by the Jewish law. They weren't kings—there's a verse in Isaiah predicting that kings will worship the messiah that got stuck to these guys. They weren't

necessarily three in number—we just guess that because three gifts are mentioned. And they weren't there at all in the stable—they started out *after* they saw the sign of Jesus' birth, and we're told the family was in a house when they arrived. So maybe we should re-name the Christmas carol, "We Three Kings of Orient *Aren't*." In any case, the point of their story is that—outsiders though they were from a proper religious perspective—they hungered and thirsted to match their knowledge with righteousness, in the forms of humility and generosity. Their reward, promised to all those who are hungry in this way, naturally follows: "they will be satisfied." Even though the magi had to sneak out of town to avoid Herod, let's hope they *were* satisfied. Certainly, they were the earliest and among the most popular figures in the birth story, showing up in artistic depictions as early as the second century, and dominating medieval art. Everybody likes a story about rich guys humbling themselves.

The merciful will receive mercy, declares the fifth Beatitude. This was my extra purchase for a prop, from someone in Burlington who started with fifty or so Italian ceramic figures and was down to a few until I came along desperate to acquire the figure of . . . the innkeeper. [produces and places innkeeper figure] Why associate *him* with mercy? It may be the easiest word in the Beatitudes to understand, but the hardest to perform. We are hard wired for justice, not mercy, from the moment, as toddlers, that we first whine, "That's not *fair!*" Mercy, by contrast, doesn't come naturally to us. But in Jesus' parables, mercy is God's defining behavior, and he declares that you can't get into the kingdom without practicing it. The power of mercy is that it operates in silence: a debt dropped, forgiveness offered without extraction of an apology, an act of kindness performed quietly or anonymously. The innkeeper historically gets a bad rap for turning away Joseph and his very pregnant wife. But remember, they *did* end up in his stable. His rooms were all taken, and stables at that time were not separate structures but the house's or inn's ground floor, where it would not be good business to welcome a woman wailing in labor and her bawling newborn (The innkeeper was probably not familiar with the carol lyric, "the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes."). The "fair" thing for the innkeeper to do was to say, "sorry, we're booked, you might try the Holiday Inn." But he had mercy, he gave them shelter, such as it was; and ever since, he has been forgotten or vilified for not giving them the Penthouse

Messiah Suite. Let us now declare this merciful man *blessed*, and let's make room in our own inns for inconvenient people like Joseph and Mary whose demands on us are *just not fair*.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,” according to the sixth Beatitude. Have you known anyone who was pure in heart? I suppose it depends on what grade of purity we demand, which the Beatitude doesn't describe, but we connoisseurs of Vermont maple syrup have high standards. In all my years, I have known two, maybe three, people who, beneath their surface innocence and goodness, seemed to be that way right down to the core. But they are so rare that my only safe bet from the creche is the angel who always comes with the set [produces angel figure], even though there is no angel mentioned at the stable in the biblical account. Maybe an angel guided the shepherds there, like Siri: “in 200 feet, the messiah will be on your left.” [places figure] In fact, we don't know much about angels, but I appreciate how understated their role is in the Gospels: they show up at Jesus' birth to say “Hooray, he's here,” they show up at his tomb to say “Hooray, he's *not* here,” and that's pretty much it. But as heavenly beings, whatever they are, they are presumably pure in heart, and they certainly see God.

The seventh Beatitude declares, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.” At first glance, getting assigned a kind of nickname seems weak compared, for example, to inheriting the earth; but in fact, it's an incredible appellation. I quoted the literal “they shall be called the *sons* of God” rather than the gender-neutral “children of God” precisely because the expression echoes Jesus' death scene, when the centurion observes the temple veil torn as Jesus expires and exclaims, “Surely, this was the son of God!” The link to peacemaking is that Jesus' sacrifice of love creates the “peace on earth, good will to humanity” proclaimed by angels to the shepherds. The Messiah is called the Prince of Peace. The Hebrew word, *shalom*, means much more than the absence of conflict: it carries the positive connotation of harmony in relation to God, what the apostle Paul calls “the peace that passes understanding.” To be a peacemaker, therefore, is not just to just to reduce conflict but also—perhaps primarily—to facilitate harmony with God. And so, in our manger scene, the one who the Gospels call the son of God is the ultimate peacemaker, even as a baby. [produces and places baby Jesus figure]

Finally, “Blessed are those who are who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.” This begins the eighth and last Beatitude, which expands into the next verse to include Jesus'

disciples, most of whom would be hunted down and killed for their identification with him. But now, back in the stable, we have one last figure, who may be my favorite. It's Joseph, of course. [produces Joseph figure] He is the first person who loses something for identifying with Jesus. Certainly, by this act, he qualifies as blessed. Joseph is typically depicted standing off to the side, staring helplessly down, and I imagine him thinking, "In what sense is this child *mine*, and what price am I going to pay for this?" I know he got a message in a dream to accept the child, but would you believe such a dream after you woke up? Would you uproot your life for it? Would you go back to face a Nazareth full of people who would find your explanation laughable? And yet this quiet man endured all of this for identifying with Jesus, and we wouldn't have Christmas without him. Blessed are you, Joseph. [places figure]

There. I've distributed my garage sale treasures, God's punchline delivered by a modest young mother, a village victim, an unshaven, shaking shepherd, some heretics from Iraq, an outstanding innkeeper, a hovering harbinger from the heavenly host, a burbling baby, and his dubious dad. Inside this stable fits the kingdom of heaven. If you get the joke, well, *blessed are you*.



Photo by Jim Tringe