

Street barber video.

Sheer grace.

And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon,¹⁸ who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.¹⁹ And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all.

And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

²² “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! ²³ Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.

“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

²⁶ “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.”

What we have here is the state of the universe address of King Jesus. No doubt, if you are a member of the audience that day, you’re ready for him to lay down his tour de force—his first and last lecture. No doubt you’re expecting something grand. Instead Jesus talks about the Eleanor Rigbys of the world. “Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice at the church where a wedding has been lives in a dream. Father Mackenzie writing the words to a sermon that no one will hear, no one comes near. All the lonely people.” All the lonely people, this is who Jesus is talking to.

And as you can imagine this came as something of a surprise to those who were listening that day. This is Luke’s rendition of what is called in Matthew 5 the sermon on the Mount. Here in Luke 6, Jesus is standing on a flat place, so this is the sermon on the plain.

To give you a sense of the expectation that had built, it has been 2,000 years since Jesus walked this earth. Two thousand years before that a man by the name of Abraham was invited out away from the city in which he lived, and told to look up at the stars—his children would number more than these. Abraham had a son, Isaac, who had sons, Esau and Jacob, Jacob (whose name at one point is changed to Israel, because he strove with God), had 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel. One of his sons Joseph is sold off by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. Initially Joseph rescues his family during a famine, but they lived in Egypt long enough to become a threat to the Egyptians. So, Israel went from cohabiters with the Egyptians, to Pharaoh’s own private slave workforce. And there they languished for centuries. When Pharaoh finally granted them their freedom it was smooth sailing from to the Promised Land. Actually it was just the opposite, God’s chosen, beloved people were led through the desert for 40 years facing enemy opposition, and near starvation conditions.

And while they were in the wilderness their leader Moses drew near to God and received from him two tablets with the blessings and the curses of following closely or disobeying God—they were the Ten Commandments. This was the picture of what it looked like for God’s people to live as

God's people. So, throughout these long years, the thing they kept close to their hearts, something that enemy nations and inhospitable conditions couldn't take away were these commandments, and a word of promise. You will be my chosen beloved ones and I will be your God.

So, in good times and in bad, in times of abundance and lean times, God's people Israel held on to this promise that one day God would send a Messiah to set all things to right—living with these pillars of hope set before them.

And as Jesus looked out over the crowd, who, it says was made up of a crowds of his disciples, and multitudes from far and wide, they were ready. Today was the reckoning, their vindication had arrived. What would he say? Will he finally set things right? He will, in his own way.

All nations and earthly powers, all religions—without exception—express a movement towards the divine, that either involves the elevation of might, or the ascending of the individual to the place of God through the triumph of the individual spirit or the enlightenment of each person. Without fail, this is how nations and religion views the path up the mountain. And then there's Jesus.

Jesus' state of the universe address begins by pronouncing blessing, he begins by lavishing grace, sheer grace: **“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.** This is absolutely ground breaking. These statements from Jesus, grammatically they're not imperatives (come on people get poor, be miserable); they're not in the subjunctive mood (gee I wish you were more poor or hungry, then I could finally do something with you); these statements are in the indicative mood, they are very simply divine blessings. Listen, you who are poor, hungry, the overlooked, you are going to be blessed by King Jesus. This is gospel. Jesus has a special love for these who are so completely and utterly overlooked by everyone else. That's good news.

Now I know that immediately when we hear someone speaking from Scripture saying that God is going to bless one particular type, we get up on our fairness haunches and think: “hey, what about

me?” We can’t have a baseball tournament without everyone getting a trophy. Gimme a break. This groundbreaking Sermon of Jesus says very clearly that these people receive something unique, they receive the Kingdom of God, they have Jesus and his arms around them.

The hungry, Jesus says, will be satisfied in a way that the strong and powerful, and secure will not be—how could they, they have all they need (that’s why Jesus responds with the woes). That the miserable ones, Les Miserables, will laugh in such a way that is only possible with the unrestrained joy and peace that Jesus brings. To be so utterly disenfranchised and without a voice or power in this world, and yet the one whose word, the Bible says, spoke out over the formless void in the beginning and created this, that Logos/Word says we’re blessed, how can you not but laugh.

Do you see the unbelievable grace in these? Jesus begins his teaching ministry not up in the lofty stratosphere of high minded teaching, but he starts down in the valley where real people live, and real people struggle.

What’s the first step of the 12 step AA program: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable. Not I came to believe that if I had enough willpower I could whip this thing. It’s not God helps them who help themselves (Koran), it’s those who can’t help themselves AND those who help others who get Jesus’ blessing. It’s never those who help themselves. The beatitudes are a communication, not a command. They are gifts from the gracious Lord to the world out there.

The other thing you should notice about these statements, it doesn’t say blessed are the Christian poor, the Christian hungry, the Christian miserable. The Beatitudes embrace and girdle the whole world. A very dear teacher of mine, Dale Bruner, New Testament professor emeritus from Whitworth University, says these sayings are profoundly evangelical, unquestionably Christ is the center, but they are also deeply liberal, that center has long arms.

I think we have a great deal to learn about these statements. And I wonder if the only way for us to do so is by stepping out from and looking beyond our places of comfort? Joy, laughter, peace,

that wells up and overflows into barren and broken places, this, in so many respects is the experience of the global church.

Now you have heard some of this before, but it bears repeating. Throughout the last year or so, I had the chance to travel with an absolutely amazing organization, one that is so worthy of our support and generosity. The Outreach Foundation is a Presbyterian Mission agency that exists to connect the American Church with the global church in relationship. And as we traveled to these places we came, not as those who have everything to give, but as learners, listeners, and friends. And through The Outreach Foundation I met a woman by the name of Marilyn Borst, who, to call her a force of nature is probably an understatement. Marilyn travels to the places where the church is vulnerable to the deepest oppression places like Iraq, Syria, North Korea, and she introduces people like me to the beauty of their stories. We had the chance to travel with her last year to Cuba, and then to the Holy Land.

And with the time I have remaining, I would just like to share a few stories of the church in these places.

Matanzas is a city built on the bay that was once one of the largest ports for the African Slave trade. Its large population lines the sprawling and surrounding hillsides. Under the Castro regime religion was relegated to the margins and was not recognized by the state. They did everything they could to bury the gospel, and they nearly did. Central Presbyterian Church, in the heart of Matanzas had all but lost its entire congregation, were it not for the Suarez Family. For 15 year Raul, Ophelia, and their two children were the Church membership. Each and every Sunday they would travel to church like many of you, they turned on the lights, opened the doors and the windows, and there in the sanctuary they would share their family devotions, singing songs together, reading Scripture together, praying together. 4 people, 15 years. So that others would see that the Church was not gone. The Suarez' also happened to be professors at Seminario Evangelico Theologica, just up the hill. They were the only two, and there were stretches of time when they didn't have any students to teach, but they continued to work and pray and serve, believing that the savior they worship was as near to them then as he would be with 100 students.

This bold, resilient, unswerving hope didn't go unnoticed, in fact it was the quiet resilience of people like the Suarez' that got the attention of Castro—who eventually lightened his grip. In the last 20 years the school has flourished, educating more than 400 students from the island and beyond. And Central Presbyterian has come back to life with an active congregation of nearly 100 people, who serve many more hundreds throughout the week.

Al-Kahf is a part of Diyar the International Center of Bethlehem Palestine. They make small craft items to sell at the Christmas Lutheran Church in downtown Bethlehem. Bethlehem is a Palestinian city that is walled in by the Israeli Government, accessible only through checkpoints guarded by military soldiers. Their water access is restricted to 2 days per week (so every home in Bethlehem has a large tank on the roof to fill, so they have water throughout the week), some parts of Bethlehem have no waste pick up services, so trash piles up, when I traveled there last year one person I spoke to described living there like being in an open air prison.

And yet some of the poorest of the poor men and women with the help of the Bethlehem Bible College and Diyar Christian Ministries, collect the fragments of broken bottles, destroyed during Israeli invasion, then assemble them together into pieces of art that tell the story of the “hopes and fears of all the years” that people have in Bethlehem today. The broken glass pieces are a sign of the brokenness of our world, and it is also the reason for God incarnate. Through Jesus, he brought the divine and the human back together. Jesus picks up what seems to be worthless and hopeless and transforms it into beautiful who creations.

On the little card that accompanies each piece it says this: “It is this incarnation, which took place here in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, which gives us the strength to continue to look for broken lives and hopes and to transform them through art into angels and different art pieces, messengers of justice, peace, and dignity.”

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These are the words of King Jesus, to his people, sheer grace.