

*Blessed are the Cheese Makers?*

Matthew 5:1-12, Micah 6:8

Whitefish UMC

January 30, 2011

- † People have been misunderstanding Jesus, apparently, from the beginning-- at least, according to Monty Python's "Life of Brian" anyway. Let's take a look: (*play first two minutes of Beatitudes sequence*).
- † I love this somewhat irreverent take on humanity's response to the Beatitudes for a couple of reasons. First, it shows people being their flawed, diverse, funny, quarrelsome selves. Second, it shows how difficult it must have been (and still is) for people to accept Jesus' upside down blueprint for how to live.
- † We'd all like to have clear and concise operating instructions for how to navigate this world we find ourselves in. Barbara Lemmel writes: "In her book *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, Anne Lamott describes the afternoon she misplaced her father. His brain cancer had progressed to the point where he was functioning much like an eager-to-please three year-old. Lamott had brought him along with her one day as she ran errands. Just before she ran into the local bank, she gave him a candy bar and strapped him into the passenger seat.
- † "Of course there was a huge line, Lamott recalls, "so every so often I'd run to the back of the bank and look through the window to make sure he was still there (as if someone were going to kidnap him)."

- † The last time I looked, he wasn't there -- the car was empty! I felt like adrenaline had been injected directly into my heart, and I turned to stare out the windows behind the tellers just to collect my thoughts, and through them I saw this crazy old man pass by, his face smeared with chocolate. . . . He was just walking on by, holding his candy bar, staring up at the sky as if maybe his next operating instructions were up there.”
- † “If God would just give me a sign, if God would simply tell me which path to choose, everything would be all right.” I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard a version of that statement, or said it to myself.
- † But God DOES give us a roadmap for life, only we don’t always want to follow it, or we think we can’t. God began, through the prophet Micah, with these instructions: “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” So simple, right? But really so complex.
- † And so life-changing. As he begins the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us what we can expect if we follow God’s operating instructions. Walking humbly with God requires openness to learning God’s ways, and not always thinking we know who and what determines what it means to live in blessing. Meekness, purity of heart, and poorness of spirit really mean living in humility—not in self-loathing or self-righteousness but in how God sees us—with no less or no more value than our neighbors.
- † And these qualities lead to peacemaking, which fuels a hunger for right-living and the pursuit of justice not just for those like us, but for all of creation. And steady, faithful loving results all too often in mourning, even as it flows into mercy—not just for those in our immediate circle of relationship, but for the world.
- † The problem is, most of us don’t think it is even possible, let alone practical, to live the Beatitudes and Micah’s simple rules. The church doesn’t help

matters when it places the Beatitudes as the annual scripture for All Saints' Day. Doesn't that condition us to think that only certain exceptional people are able to embody these blessings?

- † Of course we forget that saints are really just ordinary people who shine the light of God into our lives, and that we are saints, too, when we offer Christlight to others. The truth is that Jesus meant the Beatitudes for everyone. So how can we accomplish the task of living them out in ordinary life?
- † Part of the answer lies in looking at them as a collection of the whole, rather than individually. Each is related to the other, and they build on one another. There are three principles for living into the spirit of the Beatitudes: simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion.
- † Simplicity means hearing the words of Jesus for what they are, not what we wish they would be. The Beatitudes don't say, "Blessed are those who help themselves." I know I have told you more than once that most people believe that the Bible says "The Lord helps those who help themselves." (Of course, it doesn't—quite the contrary.) That doesn't mean we are to be irresponsible, but it does mean we are meant to look beyond our own merits and our own security.
- † We receive more courage, though, than fear, when we hear Jesus saying, "You are blessed in this life whenever you demonstrate humility, bring a peaceful presence, open your heart to others, and show mercy on those who cry out for it." That is the simple message of the Beatitudes.
- † We all know that there is more than enough cynicism to go around these days. Cynicism offers little hope that things will get better. The mantra is "Don't worry about it—that's just the way things are. You'll get used to it." The Beatitudes offer hopefulness instead of cynicism.

- † Why? Because we put our trust in Christ, who offered hope to the most hopeless. Even when the world tells us otherwise, we remember that God defeated the powers of violence, sin, and death in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And that makes all the difference, for we know what it means to be hopeful with possibility of new life.
- † Finally, the Beatitudes demand that we hold to the third principle of compassion. That means not pity, or feeling sorry for someone. It goes much deeper than that. Henri Nouwen offers this insightful description of compassion:
- † “Compassion grows with the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts through all walls which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end.”
- † We are distinct, but more importantly, we share the gift of being created in God’s image, and so we belong to one another as family. We walk in one another’s shoes, even as Christ walks in front, behind, beside, and around us.
- † If this all sounds impossible, hear these compelling words of Henri Nouwen, writing in a different setting: “The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus?. . . In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, that cares, that reaches out and wants to heal.”
- † Retired Bishop Reuben Job boiled down Jesus’ (and John Wesley’s) blueprint for living into what he called “Three Simple Rules.” They are worth repeating. First, do no harm. Second, do all the good you can by all the means you can as long as ever you can. Third: stay in love with God.

- † That third one is really the foundation for all the rest. It means that we don't rely on our own merits to live a good life, but instead we put our trust in God's grace. For blessedness is found in surrendering—in letting go—in knowing our need and the need of the world around us and knowing that God really cares about those needs, is really present with us to meet those needs.
- † Who teaches us how to do this? Jesus. I love the story that Barbara Lemmel tells of her little boy: One early morning, my three-year-old son Micah (yes, named for the prophet) and I were driving into town for preschool. Micah was in the front seat with me. To entertain himself, he began looking in the vanity mirror on the back of his sun visor. I began a game with him. "Who's in the mirror? Is it Daddy?" "No!" "Is it Uncle John?" "No!" "Is it an elephant?" "No!"
- † Then, just to make things interesting, I asked, "Is it Jesus?" Micah stopped for a moment. "You know," I continued, "whenever you look in the mirror, you see Jesus a little bit. Jesus is always in you a little bit."
- † Micah was silent for a moment. Then, with all the theological wisdom of a three-year-old, he corrected me. "I need Jesus to be in me a *lot*," he said.
- † And those are all the operating instructions we need.
- † Blessed are the cheese makers? Yes. And blessed are YOU who need Jesus in you. Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Lemmel, "Eavesdropping," <http://www.religiononline.org>

Charles James Cook, "Matthew 5:1-12," Feasting on the Word, 2010.