

Here's my nod to the Super Bowl. A guy took his blonde girlfriend to the Super Bowl Game. They had great seats right behind their teams' bench. After the game, the boyfriend asked how she liked it. "Oh, I really liked it!" she replied. "Especially the tight pants and all the big muscles, but I couldn't understand why they were killing each other over 25 cents." Dumbfounded, the boyfriend asked, "What in the world are you talking about?" She said, "Well, they flipped a coin, 1 team got it – and then for the rest of the game, all they kept screaming was "Get the quarter back! Get the quarter back! I'm like, helooooo! It's only 25 cents!"

Phyllis Diller said that "the reason why women don't play football is because 11 of them would never wear the same outfit in public."

Of all the things that Jesus said – and we have to admit that some of them are rather odd -- I always find the Beatitudes the most difficult to preach on. There has been considerable discussion about how best to translate these pronouncements of blessing and woe into contemporary English. Some scholars have suggested that the translation 'blessed' would better be replaced by 'happy' or 'fortunate,' and 'woe' should be replaced by 'how terrible' or 'sorrowful.' The problem with these new proposed translations is that they focus on the emotional state of the respective parties, but, scripturally, these sayings are called 'performative language' rather than merely descriptive. That is to say, when Jesus says that 'the poor' are blessed because theirs 'is the kingdom of God' (v. 20), the very pronouncement begins the process of bringing it to reality. In the same way, to pronounce 'woe' on 'the rich' is to begin the judgment against them.

However we translate Luke's Greek, what must be made clear is that Luke is insisting on the grand eschatological (fancy word for end-times) reversal expected at the end of time has already begun now. Luke also explicitly emphasizes that the reversal is complete. Not merely are those who are 'hungry' going to be 'filled' and those who 'weep' begin to 'laugh' (6:21), but those who are 'full now' will become 'hungry' and those who 'laugh now' will 'mourn and weep' (6:25). Through Jesus' ministry, God is acting FOR some and AGAINST others. But this reversal is not to suggest that God's favor is in some way a 'zero-sum game' whereby blessings for some necessarily must come at the expense of others. But it does make clear that those who have hoarded God's blessing in the past for themselves, and left others in need, will be judged for their greed and lack of compassion.

Judged by its opening, the theme of this 'Sermon on the Plain' might be summarized as promise and peril. The promise of God's blessing upon the needy at the end of the age is beginning to be fulfilled in Jesus' ministry, and that very approach of the end holds out peril to those who would seek to keep blessings only to themselves. Judgment is as sure as blessing, but there is no joy taken in that prospect since God calls us to 'love our enemies' and 'bless those who curse us.' (Lk 6:27-28) The first blessing extended to those who receive the 'woes' would be to warn of the impending peril if we do not change our ways. (adapted from HOMILETICS ONLINE, Feb 13, 2022, p. 7)

OK, I said this is a difficult passage to preach on – what's the 'so-what' for us? Often referred to as 'the heart of the gospel,' the beatitudes offer us a view of the world from the heart of God. That's the goal of our Christian life – to continually grow in our ability to view life through Jesus' heart, God's heart. It changes our perspective entirely when we realize that the purpose of our life is not our own fulfillment and happiness. The purpose of our life is to live as Jesus lived. That means sharing God's love with others. The purpose of our life

is to do the good works God created us to do. The purpose of our life is to represent Jesus' character, mission and message to the world.

Jesus' teaches everything from the place of grace – pure, unmerited, unearned love. Even His toughest teachings – the ones that make us squirm, the ones that offend us, the ones that challenge our worldview – come from a place of love. Jesus' words might seem challenging, even harsh. But what if were to view the words through Jesus' heart? Would that change how we respond to them? What did Jesus want them – and us – to know?

I'd suggest that the first thing Jesus was telling them was that we shouldn't judge our life by our current circumstances. Write that down! It's important. Don't judge life by our current circumstances.

Don't set our heart on the things of this world. That's not what we were made for. We're healthy, wealthy, popular and powerful now? Good! But don't base our happiness, self-worth or security on these things. Or, perhaps we are poor, grieving, unpopular or persecuted right now? God is with us. But don't base our attitude or our self-worth on these things. Our circumstances don't define us. Whether our circumstances drive us closer to God – or further from God – is what's important.

It's easy to let the good things in life – good health, happy relationships, social acceptance, status symbols, lots of stuff – become the foundation for our attitude, our worldview, even our identity. But somehow it seems that these things tend to draw us further away from God than toward Him. One of the easiest ways to see this is that tithing is greater in those with SMALL incomes rather than LARGE incomes. I've actually had people tell me "I make \$65,000, and you're telling me the Bible tells me I'm supposed to give 10% of it -- \$6500 of it -- away to the church and other charities? Do you realize how much money that is?" Actually, I do. I don't need to use a calculator to figure this out – probably none of us do! And it stands to reason that it is a lot easier to give 10% of a bigger number away than a lesser number. The problem is that we tend to spend our money as fast as we make it. On more and more stuff. And God, church, charity get a few leftover crumbs. That's a 'woe to you who are rich' kind of scenario.

Charles de Vaulx founded a hedge fund called International Value Advisers in 2007. He was the chief investment officer for the fund. At its peak, IVA had more than \$20 billion in assets under management. But in 2020, some of his major investments lost money – a LOT of money. According to one of Charles' friends, "It was never about the money. The IVA fund was an embodiment of de Vaulx's personality and when it began to unwind, he took it personally." A few weeks after the IVA board voted to close the fund and liquidate its assets, Charles de Vaulx, a married father of 2, jumped to his death from a skyscraper in midtown Manhattan. It's tragic. I feel sorry for him and his family. He defined his self-worth, his happiness, his purpose by the value he returned for his investors. Don't set our hearts on the things of this world. Circumstances change; God's character and promises are the same yesterday, today, and forever. Jesus knew His disciples would experience times of great success AND great persecution in their ministries. And so He taught them – and us – to not judge our lives by current circumstances.

The second thing Jesus is telling us is that God is working in our most painful circumstances. That's the perspective we gain if we view our painful circumstances through Jesus' heart. If we search for what God is teaching us in our circumstances, if we rely on God's power to sustain us, if we open ourselves up to receiving God's mercy in our most painful times, then we will eventually see God at work in our most painful circumstances.

Rev. Robertson McQuilkin served as President of Columbia International University for 22 years but gave up his prestigious and active ministry when his beloved wife, Muriel, developed Alzheimer's disease. Many people close to McQuilkin urged him to put Muriel in an assisted living home. But he was determined to take care of her right up until the end. It was incredibly painful watching his wife decline. In one of the books he wrote, "....it was a slow dying for me to watch the vibrant, creative, articulate person I knew and loved gradually dimming out."

And yet, McQuilkin reports that he learned so much about God from his years of caring for Muriel. He wrote, "Muriel is such a delight to me. I don't HAVE to care for her: I GET to care for her. One blessing is the way she is teaching me so much – about love, for example, God's love."

God did not rescue Robertson and Muriel McQuilkin from their circumstances. Instead, God taught them more about His love for them in their circumstances. Jesus already knows the ending of every one of our stories. At this point in the Gospel, Jesus already knows that He will die to reconcile us and give us eternal life. He already knows that God has a kingdom prepared for those who love Him. And He already knows that every painful circumstance we face in this life can be used to draw us closer to God's heart and God's will and God's purposes, if we only allow it.

And the final thing Jesus is telling us is to find our fulfillment in living for Him. There are many places in this world we can seek fulfillment. But there is only one place we can truly find it. This world is not our final home. We were made for eternal life with God, living in a world ruled by God's values, God's priorities.

So what do we do when the world's values and God's values collide? What happens when we live the values and priorities of God's world in this world? We don't fit in. Our habits and our lifestyle will look different to family, colleagues, neighbors. People will question us. Talk about us. Reject us. That's why Jesus taught so clearly that a cross awaits all who try to follow Him. And He called us to walk in His footsteps – all the way to the cross.

Now I originally closed this homily with a story about 2 young people in Nazi Germany who gave their lives in their opposition to the evils perpetrated by Adolf Hitler. It's a true story and a great story. But most of us are unlikely to face such a situation in our lifetime. We often face much smaller choices about living God's values. And if we live those SMALL choices in a God-like way, we will be prepared when we are asked to do bigger and more difficult things. And so I changed to this true story about a young man. Not as a dumbed down version of God's values, but perhaps a more realistic possibility of all the different ways – big and small – that we are asked to see the world from the heart of God, and find ourselves acting in a way consistent with the Beatitudes.

A college lacrosse coach had heard about a high school player who had all the tools. The coach went to see the student play and then met with him after the game, offering a scholarship to play for his team. The student was interested, but declined, telling the coach he wanted to wait until next spring before making a formal commitment. But he did give the coach a verbal commitment to play for him in the fall. The coach said he would hold the scholarship for one year.

Throughout the fall and winter, many college recruiters came to watch the student play, hoping to sign him up. The student turned them all down. When spring arrived, the coach met with the student again and the student accepted the scholarship. The coach asked why he waited so long to make his decision. The student explained, "Coach, you may not have noticed, but a lot of colleges came to see me play every week. Most of my teammates weren't getting scholarship offers or even being recruited earlier this year, but now

they are. By me not committing anywhere, all the college coaches who were coming to see me play got a chance to discover how good so many of my teammates really are. If I signed early with you, all the other coaches would've stopped coming to the games and none of my teammates would've gotten recruited."

The coach was stunned. At an age when so many young people are ambitious and self-absorbed, this 17-year-old was already thinking how he could help other people realize their own hopes and dreams. That's BLESSED.

The truth is that we CAN find some fleeting happiness chasing success, health, wealth, status, comfort, security. But we will never find our fulfillment or our God-given purpose in those things. God made us to find our fulfillment, our purpose, our life in living for Him and others. It's never easy. Jesus was very clear about that. So we don't set our hearts on the things of this world. We set our hearts on knowing God and living in His will, and we discover the life that God made us for, a life that is both abundant and eternal – BLESSED. Amen. (last 3 points adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Jan-April 2022, p. 31-34)