

GOD'S EMPIRE: AN ALTERNATIVE KINGDOM

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Psalm 15:1-5; 1 Corinthians 1:25-31; Matthew 5:1-12

A ragtag band of humanity inches up the hill. From a distance, they look like a fuzzy caterpillar, climbing a branch toward the sun.

A wiry teacher leads the pack, his determined strides gobbling up ground. His disciples huddle behind him, struggling to keep up. And behind them, a long stand of bobbing heads and flowing robes snake down the hillside to the Sea of Galilee, a bowl of shimmering light, in the distance.

Eventually, the teacher reaches the grassy knoll at the top. A grateful crowd plops at his feet. Jesus waits patiently as the sea of people continues to swell, fed by the stream of stragglers. His penetrating gaze takes in the scene.

Frankly, they're not much to look at, mostly the dregs of society: those crippled by ailments of the body and spirit; women and children who don't even get counted in police estimates of the crowd; grimy laborers whose backbreaking toil brings them a pauper's wage. Not exactly a power-meeting of shakers and movers. The disciples are unnerved

by what they see, but Jesus breaks into a broad, toothy grin while reviewing the honor guard of the Kingdom of God.

When at last, the crowd settles into place, the master climbs atop a boulder. He gathers the folds of his robe beneath him and sits down. For a moment, he peers into heaven, sucking in the sweet mountain air. Then opening his arms to the crowd, like a hen about to gather her brood, he fires off these revolutionary words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted; blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."

Thus begins the inauguration address of the kingdom of God.

Clearly, this is not the inauguration of a new administration in Rome or Jerusalem, London, Berlin, or Washington. Nor is this a celebration of pomp and circumstance and privilege. No, this is the inauguration of God's upside-down, topsy-turvy reign. And the world as we know it, is being put on notice: God is doing a new thing in Jesus Christ unlike anything the world has seen before.

Jesus' inaugural address--more commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount--begins with nine white-knuckled truths aimed at the solar plexus of our pride. These unsettling truths are called the *Beatitudes* from the Latin word for "happy" or "blessed." But the blessedness Jesus promises is not found where we usually go looking for it: in our status, security, and success.

Instead, the first four beatitudes point us to God as the only source of a spiritually vibrant life. The second three point us to our neighbor as the place God is most likely to show up and surprise us. And the last two of Jesus' testy truths warn us if we really take him seriously--and seek to live as he lived and to love as he loved--not everybody's going

to like it: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and say evil things about you *because of me*,” says Jesus. “Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven!”

Starting then with God as the source of the “life that is life indeed” (1 Tim. 6:19, RSV), what does it mean to be “poor in spirit?” Matthew is often chastised for dumbing down Luke’s more pointed expression in his Sermon on the Plain, “Blessed are the *poor*.” But in truth, it is not poverty, per se, that is blessed, but what poverty makes possible: namely, depending on God with fervent faith and aching need because you’ve got nothing else. Those who romanticize poverty generally have little up-close-and-personal experience with it.

As Rick Bragg writes in *All Over but The Shoutin’*, a book about growing up poor in the rural south, “Anyone could tell it, anyone who had a momma who went eighteen years without a new dress so that her sons could have school clothes, who picked cotton in other people’s fields and ironed other people’s clothes and cleaned the mess in other people’s houses, so that her children didn’t have to live on welfare alone, so that one of them could climb up her backbone and escape the poverty and hopelessness that ringed them, free and clean.”

To be “poor in spirit” means you know how desperately you need God, whether that realization arises from economic deprivation or from some other ache and need. In fact, the next three beatitudes point to other kinds of poverty that can awaken us to our need for God: mourning, meekness, and hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

To mourn is to grieve for something, or more likely, someone irreplaceable who has been lost. As Anne Lamont writes in *Plan B*, “You don’t heal completely which is the good news; the person lives forever in your broken heart.”

To be meek is to arrive at such a daunting, scary place that only God's strength can see you through: like when a loved one gets a shattering diagnosis that throws you into a panic; or when someone you love and who once loved you, betrays you at such a depth, you fear the wound will never heal.

Unfortunately, the English word, *meek*, suggests timidity or weakness. But in the Bible, meekness is associated with the kind of quiet, steady strength that wells up when God's Spirit is near. In fact, in the Bible, only two persons are described as meek: Moses and Jesus. That's pretty good company to keep.

To hunger and thirst for righteousness means to recognize a lack of integrity and justness in yourself and the world around you. As the Psalmist prays, "O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from the heart."

And yet "hunger" and "thirst" are humane, gracious words, for they acknowledge that we are not yet who we want to be, but we're trying. As someone told me this week, "I'm not yet at the place I want to forgive (the one who did me such a terrible wrong), but at least I'm finally at the place I *want to*, want to."

Thus, to be poor in spirit is to recognize that your own resources are spent because your wound or grief, weakness or need, is so great that unless God shows up in a profound and personal way, you're sunk. As Peterson vividly paraphrases in *The Message*, "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and (God's) rule."

Off the coast of Plymouth, England, stands the Eddystone Lighthouse. The first lighthouse was placed there over 200 years ago. The architect brashly inscribed the

cornerstone, "Blow, O ye winds! Rise, O ocean! Break forth, ye elements, and try my work!"

Three years later, a raging storm destroyed the lighthouse. The architect, who happened to be at the site, was killed.

After that, John Smeaton, a pioneer in civil engineering, built a new light house on the site. He dug deep to anchor the building's foundation in solid rock. And when the project was done, the inscription *he* put on the cornerstone bespoke a quiet humility: "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it."

Two centuries later, that lighthouse still stands in appreciation of the sea's fierce powers; it was founded upon a rock.

As Paul warns the proud, brash Corinthians, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord! For God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus."

And yet from this meek, trusting place of utter reliance on God, the beatitudes suddenly veer off in a bold, venturesome direction. Instead of leaving us to bask in the quietness of spiritual retreat, they call us into gutsy engagement with the real world. Suddenly, we're no longer talking about me and God but me and my neighbor and even, my enemy: "Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers."

Later in his inaugural address, Jesus will say, "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.'" Which is to say, when we are merciful--caring for and with others, hurting where they hurt and weeping when they weep--our hearts are beating in sync with the heartbeat of God.

In fact, biologists tell us that one way to classify creatures is according to their ability to feel pain. An oyster, even if removed from its shell, feels almost nothing, but the higher one goes on the scale of life, the greater the sensitivity to pain. Mammals can feel a great deal of pain. And the highest creature in complexity, the human animal, feels not only pain of the body, but pain of the soul.

So too in the spiritual sphere: the closer one gets to Jesus, the more our hearts are apt to break over the things that break the heart of God.

In that regard, my heart is breaking over the plight of refugees, suddenly banned from our shores. Here in a quest first and foremost for *our* security, we are consigning helpless women and children--who are the large majority of refugees--to the clutches of ISIS. Does it really have to be either/or, our security or abandoning the world's most vulnerable citizens, "yearning to breathe free," to fare for themselves in the midst of wholesale war and unspeakable atrocities?

I'm praying that our President and nation will find a way to do both: care for ourselves while caring for others. Because as followers of Jesus, we don't get to choose.

Right now, our church is poised to welcome its third refugee family, a Muslim family from the Congo: three adult women, a one-year-old, and a baby due in May. Thankfully, we're not doing this alone, but in partnership with World Relief, an evangelical humanitarian group, and our friends at the Temple.

This bold venture in faith springs out of abiding trust in God and Jesus' call to be merciful toward others. As he told the eager young lawyer whose question prompted the Parable of the Good Samaritan, "Which one--the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan--proved a neighbor to the wounded man?"

“The one who showed mercy,” answered the lawyer.

“That’s right,” said Jesus. “Now *you* go and do likewise.”

As Jesus’ people, seeing clearly what we are called to do is purity of heart. And these days, as in Jesus’ day, that means working to be a peacemaker in a troubled world. And according to Jesus, those who do will receive the highest medal of distinction awarded in God’s kingdom. They shall be called the *children of God*.

Recently, a Knollwood mom picked up her five-year-old son from her parent’s place where he spent the afternoon. On the way home, her son asked, “Momma, who’s *your* mom?”

“My mom is your Nana,” she answered.

He puzzled over that a bit and then said, “Then who’s *your* nana?”

“Well, both my nanas died, and now they live in heaven with Jesus.”

More thoughtfulness on the little boy’s part. Then he shook his head and said, “*Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!* Why is it always about Jesus?!”

In truth, sometimes I share his frustration. Sometimes, it seems life would be a lot easier without Jesus. His call to be merciful means we don’t get to play it safe. His call to purity of heart means we can’t turn a blind eye to the needs of others. His call to be a peacemaker means we don’t get to dismiss and demonize those with whom we disagree. “*Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!* Why is it always about Jesus?”

Because without him, the life that is left is not much life at all. But in his company, we journey ever deeper into the grace and goodness of God until from that safe place, we begin to live with Jesus’ brand of compassion and courage. For we are partisans of that kingdom where the name of Jesus is the name above *every* name. And our most

essential calling is to become a living embodiment of the prayer, “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*”

Eternal God, make us hungry and thirsty most of all, for you. And make us ever more fearless and free in your service that in time, others might see, even in us, some passing resemblance to Jesus. For it is our most earnest hope and longing to become more and more like him. In Jesus’ name we gather and pray and hope to live. Amen.

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