

## **"They Told Me This Was Easy!"**

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Texts: Genesis 32: 22-31 and Matthew 5: 1-13

"Happy are those who are hopeless," Jesus says, "For the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs." How does that sit with you? I've been pondering for a couple of weeks and many trail miles, and rather than talking about what I think about it right away, I'd like you to join in the wrestling I've been doing with this translation of the first beatitude. "Happy are those who are hopeless." (The congregation will experience silence for a time to consider what this might mean for them. I'll then invite some responses.) This opening sentence in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, makes it clear from the outset that this faith thing isn't always easy, is it. Whether we don't understand what is said in scripture, or we just don't like it, or maybe we just get uncomfortable...scripture is not something that is always plain as day. Maybe somewhere along the line someone told you faith, or the study of scripture, or anything to do with God was "easy". Well, clearly, it is not always easy.

Perhaps you would have been more comfortable if we used a different

translation of the sentence, maybe from the New Revised Standard version which reads, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven". First off, their blessed, and that can't be all bad. Second, "poor in spirit" sounds to me like kind of a down day. Maybe a little blue for a day. Either way, it seems softer, gentler, and maybe a pick me up for the next time I have a down day. But "happy are the hopeless"? That takes my head and heart in a whole other direction.

One way at this is to consider the context, or the audience, to whom Jesus was speaking. They were different from us in many ways, and yet also the same. They lived in an occupied land, which meant someone other than them made ALL the rules, and they had no say. Many of them were enslaved, or at least servants to the wealthy and powerful. Almost all were poor and spent most of their lives in survival mode. Trying to survive economic, social and religious oppression on a level very few of us in this context understand. To look around, most of the people in the audience for Jesus' sermon were hopeless -- or at least had every reason to be. To think that they might receive blessing had to feel good. Who doesn't need to be called blessed?

That still doesn't help me deal with the word "happy". Maybe it's because I struggle with that word anyway. What does it mean to be happy? To figure this

out, I went to favorite author, Brene Brown and her book *Atlas of the Heart*. She defines happiness as: "stable, longer-lasting, and normally the result of effort. It's lower in intensity than joy, and more self-focused. With happiness, we feel a sense of being in control. Unlike joy, which is more internal, happiness seems more external and circumstantial." Brown goes on to quote Anne Robertson, a theologian and writer, on the difference between joy and happiness:

[Robertson] explains that the Greek word for happiness is *Makarios*, which was used to describe the freedom of the rich from the normal cares and worries, or to describe a person who received some form of good fortune, such as money or health. Robertson compares this to Greeks as the "culmination of being" and the "good mood of the soul". Robertson writes, "Chairo is something, the ancient Greeks tell us, that is found only in God and comes with virtue and wisdom. It isn't a beginner's virtue; it comes as the culmination. They say its opposite is not sadness, but fear." (Brown, p204, 205)

Just to make this more confusing, or interesting (?), the Greek used in the Bible for the Beatitudes is *Makarioi*. Theologians argue about what the best translation may be. Some say blessed, some say happy. Nobody is talking about poor in spirit versus hopeless. And here we are, trying to figure out what Jesus is saying to us in this first Beatitude.

And that leads me to that other scripture, the one from Genesis. Perhaps it's familiar to you. In that story, Jacob, the notorious swindler and otherwise nefarious dude, is caught up in a dream in which he wrestles with an angel. He

literally gets knocked out of joint, gets renamed, and begins a new journey of faith and faithfulness. The reason I picked that scripture is I think it is a good image for both of the scriptures we read this morning. Much of faith is not about having answers, but wrestling with the questions.

This is particularly true when a scripture makes you uncomfortable, or you're tempted to take the "bite" or the "sting" out of it. That's what I did with this first beatitude. What does it mean to say, "Happy are the hopeless". I think it can mean many things, but the important work was wrestling with what exactly Jesus was trying to say.

I don't have it all together (still wrestling), but I think Jesus was clearly trying to say that those who pray for the Kingdom (or Reign, or Kindom, or whatever language you choose) are praying that a different reality might come to place here on earth. The Kindom of Heaven may seem like an impossibility when we look at all the hurt and all the war and all the suffering around us. Sometimes we are hopeless when we look at the world, and we wonder, "can it ever come to pass?" Maybe from what I can see right now, things look hopeless, but if I put on the lens of faith, I begin to see things differently. I see hope where there was only hopelessness, I see possibility in the impossible, and I see that the Kindom of

Heaven is not something we get by wishful thinking.

The Kingdom becomes real when we begin to live out this and the rest of the Beatitudes. When we do, we may be persecuted for Jesus' sake. When we do, we will hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on... And the more we live out Jesus' pre-eminent teachings, the more that the Kingdom, which seems so out of reach, now becomes real, and possible, and hope is restored.

It is easy to get hopeless when we look at the world around us some time, but the truth is that there is something more...and not just for after we die. Jesus told us the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! And blessed, or even happy, are you when even amid hopelessness you can see that it's true. Jesus' work is not finished, it's true, but it's also not lost.

Happy are the hopeless, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. No matter how you phrase it, or how much you wrestle with it, it is still true. There is something more than what meets the eye. It's not easy to see, but with the right eyes...

Amen.