

I. Intro:

North Carolina has been on our minds lately because of the destruction of Hurricane Dorian, which humans were powerless to stop. May our prayers and relief support continue for those who are suffering from hurricane losses not only in our country but especially in the Bahamas.

About 4 years ago in Fayetteville, about 85 miles from the North Carolina coast, some actions by peacemakers actually DID reduce destruction that could have happened ... destruction of a very different type. Pastor Larry Wright was leading a New Year's Eve prayer service in a downtown Fayetteville church when a man entered the building armed with a semi-automatic assault rifle.

We know how these stories end. People die. Loved ones grieve. Social media becomes outraged. And then nothing changes. We wait for the story to repeat. But this time, the story went a bit differently.

The man walked in with his gun in one hand and an ammo clip in the other. Pastor Wright says he was unsure whether the man had a round chambered in the rifle. Some church members screamed; others ran for the door; one woman instinctively grabbed her granddaughter and sheltered her in case bullets started flying. At this point, depending on what kind of church it was, armed members of the congregation might have started shooting at him. Thankfully, that's not what happened either.

As soon as he saw the gunman, Wright stepped down from the podium and began walking toward him. He asked the man a simple question: "Can I help you?" Wright later stated, "If he was belligerent, I was going to tackle him." But it turns out that wasn't necessary.

The gunman responded by asking Wright to pray for him. He allowed Wright to disarm him and pat him down. Four deacons came and hugged the man, welcoming him to their church. As Wright prayed for him, the man fell to his knees crying. He was then invited to the front pews, where he sat as the service continued.

Wright said, "I finished the message, I did the altar call and he stood right up, came up to the altar and gave his life to Christ. I came down and prayed with him and we embraced. It was like a father embracing a son." The man then spoke to the church, apologized for his actions, and confessed that he had intended to do something terrible. Pastor Wright later remarked, "It could have went a whole different way."

The blogger who shared this story, Chuck McKnight, noted that as far as he was aware, Pastor Wright was not a pacifist, but that he perfectly modeled Christ-like nonviolent resistance in this situation.

www.thirdway.com/how-one-church-reacted-to-the-threat-of-violence

To that I say "Amen!" Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God!

II. Today we're concluding our series from the Beatitudes

A. (Sequence of blessings we've looked at)

1. 3 weeks ago Pastor Cindy told us how blessings from a biblical perspective are more than just nice words that we wish on someone.
 - a) Our tendency after blessing someone is to return to "the real world", where we usually say "talk is cheap"
 - b) She reminded us that in the biblical world, the spoken word was considered to have performative action, ie. a blessing or a curse had the power to bring about that which was proclaimed
2. 2 weeks ago, Pastor Katie asked us repeatedly if we needed a blessing in our lives, and then we had the chance to pick up a blessing card that we ourselves needed.
3. Last week Cindy urged us to bless others within the church
 - a) We powerfully received the blessing of the Lord's Supper and orally blessed each other at the table.
 - b) Then we were invited to take one of those blessing cards and give it to someone in the church.
4. As you may have guessed, today you'll be invited to share these blessings with people beyond the church. Did you notice a pattern in the movement of the actions we took with the cards?

B. The blessings shared start with ourselves, then advance out to others in the church, & then go beyond the church

1. This movement reminds me of another movement flow that we emphasize here at Waterford Mennonite Church



2. Does anybody recognize this? What is it? (a graphic symbol of our congregation's directional statement)

- a) We adopted a directional statement for our church nearly 2 years ago, which shows 4 areas of our relationships we will work at strengthening:

- (1) Our relationships with God
- (2) Our relationships with each other in congregational life
- (3) Our relationships with our neighbors in local settings
- (4) And our broader relationships in God's beloved world

- b) I see what we've done with the blessing cards as also moving with

those same outward ripples:

- (1) It starts with how God blesses us, ourselves,
- (2) Then how we bless each other in congregational life,
- (3) and then how we extend those blessings to those in our local settings and throughout God's beloved world

C. Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us to be focused outward as we end this series

1. The last verses focus on peacemaking, and on persecution, insults and slander that Christ's disciples will experience
2. Of all the Beatitudes, these verses are the ones that seem to have the most application for the world outside the faith community
 - a) Although Xian churches have their own share of conflict and division, where is peacemaking most commonly needed?
 - (1) In the world I see today, it's in secular and interreligious settings, and in international settings.
 - (2) Peacemaking is most desperately needed between countries & ethnic groups, groups with identities NOT centered in Jesus Christ
 - b) And around the world, who are the people most likely to persecute Xians for their righteousness? It's people "outside of Christ" people who don't understand & don't live by the mind of Christ
3. But I also understand that these last verses don't have to only apply to non-Xian outsiders or to hostile governments.
 - a) Pay attention to the words at the end of v. 12 (*read*)
 - b) This is a reference primarily to Jewish kings and Jewish leaders who rejected God's message that had been proclaimed by many prophets
 - c) In other words, the persecution Jesus refers to is coming from within God's own chosen people, not from Gentiles
 - d) Sadly, there are plenty of examples over the centuries of Xians persecuting other Xians ... To see that we have only to look at the persecution of the early Anabaptist in Europe by the Xian state authorities

III. Let's 1st look a little closer at these final Beatitudes

A. The blessings pronounced by Jesus in today's verses have two shifts that occur in them, compared to the earlier blessings

1. One of those shifts can be seen in verses 3 thru 10:
 - a) The early Beatitudes primarily bless those who have certain inner

thoughts or characteristics, things not immediately visible to others (e.g. poor in spirit; meek; pure in heart; hungering/thirsting for righteousness)

b) But near the end there's a shift toward blessings on those who act in certain outwardly observable ways (showing mercy; being peacemakers; being persecuted because of their righteous behavior)

2. The other shift that we see in today's verses happens between verse 10 and verse 11 (*listen to 1st phrases of each verse ...*)

a) There's a clear change in the pronouns Jesus uses, from 3rd person plural to 2nd person plural ("blessed are those" → "blessed are you")

b) Jesus is speaking about and to those who give their allegiance to Jesus

(1) He's driving home the point that his disciples should expect to be persecuted because of that allegiance.

(2) This isn't about Jesus blessing anyone who is ever persecuted, insulted or slandered for any reason. This is about persecution on account of Jesus himself!

B. So what else might a closer look at these last verses uncover? My studies revealed 2 more insights:

1. As Mennonites, we often like to quote Jesus from Matt. 5:9 (*read*). It provides direct justification for our beliefs in nonviolence and refusal to participate in war.

a) But sitting back in our comfortable pews in a nice middle-class setting and expecting someone else to work out solutions and interventions for conflicts is not what Jesus had in mind

b) It says "blessed are the peacemakers", not merely "blessed are the peaceful", or "blessed are those with peaceful attitudes"

c) Jesus pronounces blessing on those who are working actively to make peace. As such, peacemaking is not passive.

d) Contrary to being the coward's way, as many people dismiss Xian pacifists, in fact, nonviolent peacemaking often requires MORE COURAGE than the act of picking up a gun.

e) Peacemaking necessarily means that peacemakers will sometimes get brought into physical or verbal scuffles. Where everyone is content, and everyone's needs are met, there's no need for peacemakers!

2. One more insight that I found with these Beatitudes relates back to what I said about v. 12 ("Rejoice & be glad ... for in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you"):

a) We often interpret that to mean "You're in good company. If even the OT prophets were persecuted, you will be too!"

b) But it's saying more than that. I hear Jesus saying "*You're prophets too!*" Being a prophet is part of the role of being a Jesus-follower.

(1) You may not consider yourself a prophet, but remember that prophecy in the OT was not primarily about predicting the future.

(a) A prophet was a truth-teller ... someone who was the mouthpiece for God, usually with a message related to the present situation.

(b) As such, God's true prophets did not have the luxury of tweeting out God's message from the privacy of their own home, protected by armed guards and security systems

(c) A prophetic message in the name of Jesus will be heard, sometimes making a splash and producing strong resistance

(2) Authentic disciples of Jesus WILL have some kind of witness in the world. It's inevitable.

(a) If we have no witness at all, we should question the depth of the transformation we claim Jesus has done within us.

(b) Following in the way of Jesus WILL spread ripples in the world around us ... It WILL give light to all.

(3) Jesus doesn't say "You should be salt of the earth" or "I want you to be the light of the world". It's declarative:

(a) Those who are my disciples ARE salt of the earth already!

(b) As my disciples, you are prophets already! You should expect a prophet's reward, both here and in heaven.

IV. (Introducing Nadia Bolz-Weber teachings)

A. In July, Janette & I visited our son Matthew in Denver

1. When she and I had some down time, I made a point of going to check out a large church building not real far from where Matthew lives. It's the location for House for All Sinners and Saints.

a) You may not have heard of it, but then again, that church doesn't usually attract people like most of us.

b) This very unorthodox congregation is known to anyone who has read books by Nadia Bolz-Weber, the tattooed, sometimes even foul-mouthed Lutheran pastor who founded this church near downtown Denver.

(1) Her vision? To minister to people who've rejected or been rejected by traditional churches: addicts, prostitutes, ex-inmates and their parents, children and friends, as well as anyone else honest enough to admit they really don't have their life all together

(2) People flocked to her church, people desperate not just for

transparent street-savvy preaching, but for a community of unconditional love modeled on the radical love of Jesus himself

(3) Her growing popularity as an author and provocative speaker at national Christian conventions led her to step down last year as pastor of that church to pursue ministries as a public theologian

2. So when I got to the historic former synagogue, the building was not open to the public and I found no external sign of the congregation. I learned later House for All Sinners and Saints still meets there, renting space from another church in that building

B. I have been deeply moved by Pastor Nadia’s book which introduced me to that congregation, Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the wrong people (Convergent Books, ©2015)



1. In it she has a chapter on the Beatitudes, which is so profound that I can only gratefully give credit and quote from it briefly

2. One Sunday in her congregation, Pastor Nadia spoke some startling Beatitudes which she imagined Jesus offering to us today:

Blessed are they who doubt ... those who aren’t sure, who can still be surprised.

Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information.

Blessed are those who have nothing to offer.

Blessed are they who can’t fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else.

Blessed are those who “still aren’t over it yet.”

Blessed are those without documentation.

Blessed are foster kids and trophy kids and special ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved.

Blessed are they who know there has to be more than this. Because they are right.

Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn’t deserve it. (Bolz-Weber, pp. 185-8)

3. The freshness of those words is still stunning to me, but the spiritually deepest thing for me in Nadia’s chapter on the Beatitudes is when she brings to mind the very human Jesus ...

a) the Jesus who cried at his friend’s tomb, and who turned the other cheek, and who forgave those who hung him on a cross

b) *He was God's Beatitude*, she writes, -- *God's blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong.* (Bolz-Weber, p. 188)

c) I've always believed in Jesus as the incarnation of our holy and loving God, but this little insight was a new nugget of wisdom for me

(1) He WAS God's Beatitude! An embodied Beatitude! He was a Beatitude with skin on!

(2) I allowed that image to roll around in my mind for a while.

(a) As I did, I realized that, even when we cannot perfectly emulate Jesus Christ, we too can be embodied Beatitudes!

(b) In fact, I believe THAT is our calling for today as we close out this Dwelling in the Word series

V. Conclusion

A. Once more today you have the chance to do something special with blessing cards

1. I invite you to think about someone you know outside of this church, someone who could use a blessing

a) It could be someone you know very well, or someone you hardly know

b) Could be someone you know is a Christian, someone whose religion you don't know about, or someone who clearly isn't a Christian

2. Out in the foyer, and in the back of the sanctuary, are tables that have 5 different kinds of cards with illustrated Beatitudes on them.

a) As you leave worship today, choose a blessing card for that person you're thinking of.

b) The table in the back of the sanctuary is for those of you who usually exit out the north doors toward the nurture wing

3. Some of you may look at this as an outreach tool, and that's just fine. You never know what conversations or actions sharing this blessing card might prompt!

a) For example, you could use it as part of inviting someone to church if you're so led

b) Or, depending on the relationship you have with the person, the blessing card could segue into mentioning that you're praying for them.

c) But this activity doesn't have to come across as pushy at all. It's simply expressing your desire for a blessing upon that person, nothing more!

B. Friends, as God has immeasurably blessed us, God also calls

us to be not just a blessed people, but a people of blessing:

1. people who speak blessing into being with those around us ...
2. people who become God's living, breathing blessings on this earth!
3. May the Holy Spirit empower you today to become a Beatitude with skin on! Amen!