

“Starting Point”

Matthew 5:1-12

3rd Sunday after Epiphany

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The Franciscan priest Richard Rohr has written:

“All great spirituality is about what we do with our pain.”¹

This is, in my mind, a FASCINATING statement.

Not what we do with our gifts.

Not what we do with our money.

Not how we balance our work life and family life and church life
and leisure life...

Spirituality—our religious life—is about what we do with our pain.

It is, according to Rohr, the starting point.

Hold that thought...we’ll return to it in just a moment.

And let’s take a look at our text.

Our text for today is one of the best known in the New Testament.

The Beatitudes.

And what is a Beatitude?

A Beatitude is a blessing.

Nine blessings with which Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount.

But these are not your every-day, run-of-the-mill blessings, are
they?

If I were to ask you to name your blessings, off the top of your
head, what would you say?

¹ Richard Rohr, *Adam’s Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation*, 2004.

Your family, your children,
your health, your freedom, your church...

My guess is that you would be able to come up with 9 blessings very quickly that sound NOTHING like the blessings Jesus named for us today:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...”

What a way to begin!

Jesus looks at the at the pain and the suffering of the crowds around him, and he does NOT say, “I’m so sorry for you,”
or “I’ll be praying for you.”

Jesus says, “Blessed are you!”

Frankly, it makes me wonder about a question that lies, I think, at the heart of how we hear this text. The question is quite simple.

When Jesus lists the nine Beatitudes, was he picturing these blessings as coming from God at some future day...
or did Jesus means TODAY?

It sounds like it’s a future day:

***“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”
 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”***

Let me get at it like this.

Do you remember the scene in C.S. Lewis’ book, “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,” in which Lucy—the youngest of the four children—stumbles into the old wardrobe and discovers the world of Narnia on the other side?

She’s so excited when she returns to the house, only her three siblings don’t believe her. And when she takes them to the wardrobe to show them, they look in the wardrobe, but they don’t discover the world of Narnia.

They discover the back of the wardrobe!

And her siblings chide her, giving her a hard time for believing that there could ever be a different world than the one they see and hear and breathe and feel...²

Do you remember that scene?
 I hear the Beatitudes, and I feel like Lucy’s siblings.

Jesus describes this beautiful world to us today.

A world where those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are filled. A world where the merciful receive mercy. A world where the meek inherit the earth.

But does any of that sound like the real world to you?
 It sure doesn’t sound like THIS world to me.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Great Britain: Geoffrey Bles, 1950, in “The Chronicles of Narnia,” by C.S. Lewis, New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

A world in which people who are standing up for righteousness and justice in Iran right now...are getting squashed!

A world in which the pace of killing in Sudan in recent months rivals what happened in Rwanda in 1994.

Surely, Jesus is talking about ONE DAY...
 one day, the merciful will receive mercy...
 one day, the pure in heart will see God...

Surely, when Jesus offered these blessings,
 he did not mean TODAY.

Do you think he meant today?

There's an argument to be made that Jesus meant today.

As one scholar and writer notes, the Greeks and the Hebrews had very DIFFERENT notions of what it meant to be blessed. And most of us today are taught a definition of blessing that resembles the ancient Greeks.

“The Greek notion of blessing is that [to be blessed] gave you a privileged experience...of living above the burdens and worries and... cares of human life.”

In other words, the Greeks understood blessing as being above the pain of this world.

In contrast...

“The Hebrews never thought that about blessing. When they used the word, it meant to find the correct path...to be blessed...for the

Hebrews had more to do with orientation, with perspective, with the discover[y] of what is really meaningful in life.”³

I like that!

That gives a different feel and flavor to the Beatitudes, don’t you think?

That blessing is not about comfort, but about the correct path:

Blessed are the merciful...means you’re on the right path!

Blessed are the peacemakers...means you’re going the right way!

So what do you think?

When Jesus offered these blessings, do you think Jesus meant today?

In the book *Beautiful Souls*, the story is told of a man named Paul Gruninger.

Paul Gruninger was an ordinary person living in Switzerland, on the eve of WWII. He was a mid-level police officer, working for his country. He filled out reports and arranged security details for visiting dignitaries.

In other words, he shuffled papers.

He was a bureaucrat.

But in April of 1939, “Gruninger found his way to work blocked by a uniformed officer who told him, ‘Sir, you no longer have the right to enter these premises.’”

³ From “Yoked to a Blessing,” by M. Craig Barnes, Shadyside Presbyterian Church, February 28, 2007, found at http://www.shadysidepres.org/sites/default/files/2007_02_28.pdf.

It turned out that in all of Gruninger's paper shuffling, he had been up to something sneaky.

Was it embezzlement?

Was he helping criminals escape the country for a bribe?

No...

Gruninger was secretly altering the documents of refugees—Jews who were fleeing Austria for the safety of Switzerland, trying to escape the Nazi regime. Jews were not allowed to cross Austria's border after August 19, 1938, but for someone in Gruninger's position, "all it took was a few strokes of [a] pen to predate a passport and perhaps save a life."⁴

When Gruninger's actions were discovered by authorities higher up, he lost his job, had false rumors spread against him, was shunned by his neighbors—and then spent the rest of his life selling raincoats and animal feed until he died in poverty in 1972.

Was Paul Gruninger "blessed"?

According to the prosperity gospel preachers of our own day, the answer would be NO WAY.

But according to Jesus...I think the answer is yes.

Paul Gruninger was on the right path.

He stood in the right place.

And it was a place that began...not with his own comfort.

⁴ I first became aware of this story after reading Tom Long's article about Gruninger, "Small Acts of Courage," in *The Christian Century*, April 25, 2012. The story is told in the book "Beautiful Souls: The Courage and Conscience of Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times," by Eyal Press, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012.

It began with other people's pain.

“All great spirituality is about what we do with our pain.”

It's funny, the first time I heard that, I thought Richard Rohr meant what I do with MY pain...in other words, my theology—the way I think about God—is shaped a great deal by whatever suffering may have happened in my life. Just like the way you think about God is shaped by whatever suffering has happened in your life.

That's not wrong.
But there's more.

The way we think about God and follow God and make sacrifices for God...is also shaped by what we do with other people's pain.

Do we see it? Do we run from it? Or do we move toward it?

I'm reminded of what Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, when he was sitting in a jail cell in Birmingham, and he received a letter from eight white “liberal” clergy, suggesting that he, King, ought to curtail his non-violent demonstrations. That he ought to wait for civil rights legislation to make its way through the courts.

King responded:

“...when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to [children like her], and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her

begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness...”⁵

It is hard, King said, to wait.

Then he went on to say that what was most baffling to him was not the vitriol and hate of the white racist. It was the lukewarm response of the white moderate. Those who said they supported civil rights for all people...but when it came to acting on those beliefs, they stayed on the fence.⁶

Hmmmm....

Do you think Jesus meant today?

If Jesus meant today, then he’s telling us to enter the fray, reach out to the oppressed, speak out against xenophobia, look out for the marginalized, and stand with the poor and the poor in spirit in our own community.

The theologian Arthur McGill says that it is of little use to urge people to be brave or selfless.

“Whether people serve themselves or serve others,” McGill argues, “is not in their power to choose.”

According to McGill, brave choices, courageous choices, selfless choices are “decided wholly in terms of the world in which [people] think they live...in New Testament terms, [we] live or die according to...the kingdom to which [we think we] belong.”⁷

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington, New York: HarperCollins, 1986.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Quoted by Thomas G. Long in “Small Acts of Courage.”

All of which raises the question:

Is it a future kingdom?

Or is it a present kingdom?

Is it a kingdom that comes...one day?

Or is it a kingdom that God is ushering in...TODAY?

Here's the problem:

I've got a full schedule today.

I was planning on going for a walk when I get home from church today.

Maybe take a little nap.

Maybe catch up on my Netflix.

When it comes to the question of today, I'd like to stay on the fence for a little bit....at least until I'm done exploring the Sermon on the Mount with you this spring.

Have you ever found yourself on the fence about something?

The fence has a lot going for it.

Sometimes, sitting on the fence is my favorite thing to do.

It's a fabulous theological location.

For example, when it comes to the Beatitudes, I can make an argument that Jesus meant tomorrow...and I can make an argument that Jesus meant today...so let me just let those two ideas simmer around in my mind and heart while I'm on the fence.

Speaking of being on the fence, I remember once years ago, when I was an associate pastor, and I was riding with my Head of Staff, a good friend and mentor in ministry to me. We were headed to a Presbytery

meeting, and I asked him, for some reason, what he thought my growing edges were in ministry at that time.

He looked at me—like, do you really want to hear this?

And he said, “Sometimes it seems like you don’t want to make a mistake, so you keep trying to decide what to do, trying to decide what to do...sometimes you just need to make a decision.”

He said that to me a quarter of a century ago.
All these years later, I still remember it.
And I’m very grateful for that insight.
That he could see something about me...that I couldn’t see.

And yet, I must confess, even all these years later, there’s a part of me that still worries about making a mistake, and likes the fence. And besides...we’re almost out of time this morning.

We’ve got all spring to think about what Jesus meant in the Sermon on the Mount...

On February 1, we’ll pick up right where we left off today.
Two weeks from now, our text is Matthew 5:13-16.
Four verses.

If you wish, you can read the text in advance, have some time to think about it.

Heck, I’ll even give you a preview.

In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus follows up the Beatitudes by telling his disciples:

“You are the salt of the earth.”

“You are the light of the world.”

Hmmm...

Maybe I should change that passage.

Because I can't stand it—

when the person telling me to get off the fence
is not my former boss, or Martin Luther King, Jr...

What really gets under my skin is when the person telling me to
get off the fence is Jesus.

(Amen.)