

Matthew 4:23-5:12

The Blessed Ones

God nearest to us as we struggle

Many of us will remember the events in the Ukraine back in 2004 when Victor Yushchenko stood for the presidency of the Ukraine. But there is a part of the story regarding the deaf community that I was unaware of. Let me share the story as written by another...

Vehemently opposed by the ruling party Yushchenko's face was disfigured and he almost lost his life when he was mysteriously poisoned. This was not enough to deter him from standing for the presidency.

On the day of the election Yushchenko was comfortably in the lead. The ruling party, not to be denied, tampered with the results. The state-run television station reported "ladies and gentlemen, we announce that the challenger Viktor Yushchenko has been decisively defeated."

In the lower right-hand corner of the screen a woman by the name of Natalia Dmitruk was providing a translation service for the deaf community. As the news presenter regurgitated the lies of the regime, Natalia Dmitruk refused to translate them. "I'm addressing all the deaf citizens of Ukraine" she signed. "They are lying and I'm ashamed to translate those lies. Yushchenko is our president."

The deaf community sprang into gear. They text messaged their friends about the fraudulent result and as news spread of Dmitruk's act of defiance increasing numbers of journalists were inspired to likewise tell the truth. Over the coming weeks the "Orange Revolution" occurred as a million people wearing orange made their way to the capital city of Kiev demanding a new election. The government was forced to meet their demands, a new election was held and Viktor Yushchenko became president.

Philip Yancey writes

"When I heard the story behind the orange revolution, the image of a small screen of truth in the corner of the big screen became for me an ideal picture of the church. You see we as a church do not control the big screen. (When we do, we usually mess it up.) Go to any magazine rack or turn on the television and you see a consistent message. What matters is how beautiful you are, how much money or power you have. Similarly, though the world includes many poor people, they rarely make the magazine covers or the news shows. Instead we focus on the superrich, names like Bill Gates or Oprah Winfrey.... Our society is hardly unique. Throughout history nations have always glorified winners, not losers. Then, like the sign language

translator in the lower right-hand corner of the screen, along comes a person named Jesus who says in effect, *Don't believe the big screen – they're lying. It's the poor who are blessed, not the rich. Mourners are blessed too, as well as those who hunger and thirst, and the persecuted. Those who go through life thinking they're on top end up on the bottom. And those who go through life feeling they're on the bottom end up on the top. After all, what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his soul?*¹

The poor who are blessed not the rich. Those who mourn are blessed not those who do not know what it means to experience loss. It is those who hunger and thirst who are blessed, not those who have an abundance of food on the table.

These words come from a passage in Matthew that have been dubbed, *The Beatitudes*. One dictionary defines beatitude as “a state of supreme happiness”. This doesn't seem to fit when one realizes that the blessed people that Jesus is speaking about here appear to be experiencing great hardship and struggle.

If you look at the context of this story one realizes that Jesus has a crowd of people following him. And it wasn't the rich and famous, it was the poor and the sick. We are told that “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people...they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptic, and paralytics, and he cured them” (Matt 4:23-24).

It is with this crowd of people in his sight that Jesus heads up a mountain and sits down with his disciples and he teaches – he doesn't teach this to the crowd around him, but to his disciples, those with understanding about Jesus and his mission to the world. It is to them he teaches and shares the words that we know as the beatitudes – words about blessing.

So how can it be that Jesus can sit there and say that those in the greatest need, those placed in situations that are the most difficult, these are the people who blessed?

We humans tend to think of blessing as some kind of gift where in you profit either monetarily or are recognized for your power and prestige. It could be that you have an amazing family, good friends, a roof over your head that you don't have to worry about losing, a fridge and pantry with enough food to keep you from ever knowing hunger, you have fresh water pouring from your taps, and experience little conflict in your life personally, professionally, or even in our country. It could be that you don't have any mental or physical disabilities. And it really is a gift to be able to know life like that. Most of us in this building today would likely consider ourselves blessed. And that is not a bad thing.

¹ <https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/beatitudes/>. Accessed November 4, 2017

Still, many of us have also experienced death of a loved one or faced illness. Some may be struggling to make ends meet and others not getting along so well with parents, children, or other family members. I would suspect that when faced with those challenges the last thing we feel is blessed.

When we see those who are defeated, fighting addictions, mental or physical health issues, and extreme poverty in our community, I don't believe blessed is the first word that crosses our minds.

So what is it that Jesus is saying here? He can't really believe that struggle and hardship are blessing. That seems rather ludicrous. But this is what the words say. And maybe if you think into your experiences of hardship you can begin to understand what Jesus is teaching.

Go back into some experience in your life when you felt at a loss or hopelessness, whether it was illness or disability, figuring out how you were going to pay the next bill or put food on the table. Maybe you lost your job or a friend; it could also be the death of someone who you could not imagine living without.

Now can you imagine or remember God being closer to you in this time than at any other time in your life?

It is hard to recognize God in our struggle; in fact many of us might feel just the opposite, that we have been abandoned by God. We say, "Why me, what did I do to deserve this?"

Guess what? You probably don't deserve any of it. Some might think that God is punishing them when bad things happen, but I would like to challenge that assumption. This is not to say that we can avoid living with the consequences of our words and actions. Words and actions have consequences. But what is also important to remember is that God, through Jesus, chose to live among us, and in that, experienced loss, pain, rejection, even death. Because of Jesus, God gets it, and when you begin to pay attention you realize that God is with you.

God is with you in your struggle, in your loss, in your life. And this God who is with you is with every person whether they notice or not – whether you notice it or not.

There are two words here that I would like you to note. One is "are" as in, blessed *are*, and the other is "will" as in, for they *will*. One is about the present moment, the other about a future time. This follows along the lines of all the promises of God. God promises to be with us always, and also promises that there will be a time when we are fully present with God. Both are important to people of faith. It is in large part what we are celebrating this *All Saint's Sunday*.

God is present with God's people, always has been, always will be. With those who have come generations before us and passed down their faith, hope, and love, and also with us, the generation who share our faith, hope, and love with those around us now.

It is in this that it may be helpful to see the small screen of the one translating for the deaf community in the corner of the big screen. People of God, the church, are not the dominant forces in our culture anymore. It is evident, just by virtue of the many that we know and love, and those who are the least of these, that are not in our pews or that of most churches. It is in this that it is evident we are not the strong voice that we once were, but we can still be that translator in the corner of the screen who says, pay attention, don't believe the big screen – it's lying. It's the poor who are blessed, not the rich. Mourners are blessed too, as well as those who hunger and thirst, and the persecuted.

Don't be afraid to speak or to act, to be a voice in the corner of the screen that tells people the truth – the truth that God is real and that God loves them. The voice that teaches Jesus loves them and that we are blessed even in our suffering, because it is then that God seems nearer to us than ever. And may our own brokenness, struggle, and pain, be used to point others to God.

In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.