

As I read the Sermon on the Mount, I'm reminded of one of the early lines in the play, "Fiddler on the Roof". When the Russians begin to persecute the Jewish communities, evicting them from their homes, Reb Tevye, says: "Lord, I know we are supposed to be your chosen people, but, couldn't you choose, if only for a little while, somebody else?" The Beatitudes, on first glance, really sound like the way we don't want to live.

A life of faith in God leads to a world of contradictions. Tevye knew it, and spoke of it as a lament. I think that, if we read Christ's words in the beatitudes as a lament, this will be helpful in our understanding.

The focus of Luke's beatitudes is on the ordinary - the poor, the hungry, those who mourn, and those who are persecuted for their faith. Matthew's list, however, takes us into the extraordinary, speaking of the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and those who mourn (not only for the loss of loved ones, but also at the abiding presence and power of evil in the world).

The Greek word for blessed, 'Amakarios' has a number of meanings that includes "Happy." As a result in the Good News Bible, which I generally prefer, it chooses the phrase, "Happy are you..." to represent the idea of blessing, which I think (in this case) is a bit lacking, weak, or even frivolous. In other Greek literature (outside of Scripture), the term makarios is used to mean, "Lucky, fortunate, smiled upon by fortune, or in the broadest possible terms, favoured by the gods of fortune and chance."

I don't know whether you have paid attention to the changes in Niagara Falls over your lifetime. There used to be Sheraton tower when I was much younger. It is interesting to see that the Sherton Fallsview casino is now in the location with a prime elevation, with a wonderful, down-river view of the Falls. On the one hand I wonder why people interested in winning at the one arm bandit or the tables would even care about a view. Surely, such high priced real estate commands that the odds be even heavier stacked in favour of the house. I observe that it is part of offering 24/7 entertainment possibilities. Lucky, fortunate, smiled upon by fortune, happy, the casino patrons could be that, but I could never call them "Blessed."

Instead of "Happy are those who...", I would prefer as a translation for blessed, "You are favoured by God". I don't think we can understand the blessing that Jesus is describing if we don't understand it as God's favour. Jesus is describing a state of favour granted by God to those from whom the world has withheld favour. While the world's favour is apportioned based upon status, position, power, accomplishment and achievement, God's favour is not.

You see, the people of the Old Testament were getting it wrong. Jesus talks a great deal about this. Many thought that those who prospered were favoured by God and those who had illness or poverty or who experienced some kind of devastation, were somehow not in God's good graces. Jesus said, You've got it all wrong. God's favour is for the one on the bottom, not for the one on the top!

This is Super Bowl Sunday. The San Francisco 49ers and the Kansas City Chiefs will battle for the ultimate prize in American football, including money, cars, and a ring that guarantees life long bragging rights as the best football players in the world. In order to get a chance at that ring, these teams had to survive the playoffs. In other words, they got to the Super Bowl by preventing others from getting to the Super Bowl. They knew the field was going to be divided into the winners and the losers, and they did whatever they had to do, whatever they could do, to be the winners.

Some of you are probably asking yourselves at this point what football has to do with the Beatitudes, and that's a darn good question! First, we need to recognize that the Super Bowl isn't just about football. It's about competition; it's about economics; it's about politics of ownership, and it's actually a religion for some.

Philosopher, Alfred Whitehead once described the natural world this way: Life is lived by robbery. His observation was that the entire world daily participates in the natural food chain, constantly eating or being eaten, and that this fundamental characteristic carries over into every arena of our existence, including politics, economics, religion, social status and power. In other words, we all participate, on a daily basis, for our daily existence, in searching for what we need, and if we are able to, we take it, even if it means sacrificing the well being of another for our sake, or in religious terms, for the sake of our own agendas. In effect, the whole world is divided into winners and losers, because life is a competition, and at some fundamental level, we all want to be winners.

Haven't we heard the phrase: "We were robbed!" or "They stole the game?" These phrases aren't used by accident. They reflect a very deep-seated belief system. There's only one prize, and it's only enough for the winners.

I may be digging myself in to a corner this morning, but there is one headline this week which I found extremely troubling, that is so-called deal presented in Washington heralding Middle East peace. Presidents Donald Trump of the USA and Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel promoted a new position on Israel and Palestine, widely reported as a 'Deal of the Century'. However, this proposal was developed without meaningful participation by representatives of the Palestinian people, and is primarily in line with long-stated Israeli objectives. It constitutes an ultimatum, rather than a real, sustainable or just solution. No just peace can be established for either Palestinians or Israelis with such a plan. This is an example of a prize for the winners. It does not recognize the borders set after the 1967 conflict. (For those interested I can point you to many resources which dispute the headline-'Deal of the Century'.)

If we look at the Beatitudes with an understanding of the world's darkness acted out on the field of competition, a darkness that lives even in us, and exerts itself in every arena of life, we might just get a glimpse of Christ's lament in the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the mourning – he's talking about those who have been robbed by life, by circumstances beyond their control or by willful acts of others.

Blessed are the losers in life, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who have been found wanting in a world based on competition, for they receive God's favour even as the world withholds favour. They receive a favour unmerited and undeserved, and this favour, according to Christ, exceeds all the favour the world has to offer.

In addition to the Beatitudes that occur in Luke, Matthew adds several more: "Blessed are the merciful; blessed are the pure in heart; and blessed are the peacemakers." Matthew is cataloguing the characteristics of those whose lives have been transformed by the 'realm of God' and have chosen not to live by the 'robbery of competition', which is a win/lose game. For Matthew, the prize of God's favour is awarded to those who choose to live in communion rather than competition. In other words, to live life asking, "What is God's will for us?" Instead of, "What's best for me?"

You see, in a world that lives life at a fundamental level in the spirit of competition - a spirit that creates and sustains divisions among people, dividing them into winners and losers, Christ has called us into the "Realm of God's Kingdom" - a realm of cooperation and good will; a realm infused with a different spirit - a spirit of mutual sharing and caring exemplified in a life of communion rather than competition. Those that devote themselves to the spirit of communion will abandon the world's favour and enjoy God's favour.

The beatitudes turn over the tables, they turn our expectations and desires upside down. They promise God's favour where the world's favour has been withheld.

There are many stories about how sport has transformed the lives of athletes, particularly those who were otherwise marginalized. San Francisco 49er running back, Raheem Mostert is one of those who will have a role to play this afternoon. Mostert had a difficult upbringing in Florida, including never knowing his birth father and an accidental shooting that left him with only part of his big toe on his left foot. When he was three or four years old a gang broke in to his home at the time. There was a gun in the house that his 'dad' had bought, but it was under a pile of laundry. Mostert found it and fired it, hurting himself in the process. Years later, the one he knew as 'dad' shot his step-brother and that man now languishes in prison. Between that and the constant backdrop of crime and losing friends to gun violence as he was growing up, he has plenty of reasons to cherish his own family now. Mostert hopes his 'family' never has to live as he did.

There will be another 'turning of the tables' marked in this year's Superbowl. Offensive Assistant Coach Katie Sower will be the first female coach of the NFL to have achieved Superbowl status. She enjoyed football in her youth and later played for the Women's Football Alliance. She coached women's basketball, but did not see a way to make it to coaching in the NFL. Until, she was inspired by seeing former Women's NBA player Becky Hammon coaching the NBA San Antonio Spurs. Katie Sower then saw that her goal was also possible and so she pursued the goal she has now achieved.

The message of Christ's coming to the cross was the world's declaration of its power to win against its competition and to keep the prize. But, the resurrection was God's declaration of favour on the One who died.

When Jesus traveled to Jerusalem in the days before his death, he met a divided society, one that refused to hear God's call

to live in a different way: to share instead of hoard wealth, to welcome instead of exclude, to worship God instead of the market.

So great was his frustration that he stormed into the temple and overturned the tables of commerce set up there, just as, throughout his ministry, he ‘turned the tables’ on the accepted wisdom of the time by making room for those the world had pushed aside. His actions frightened powerful interests, and hastened the turn of events that led to his crucifixion, death, and resurrection.

These events, in turn, brought forth the Christian faith, which teaches us to follow Jesus’ path of justice-making. And so, faced with a world of growing inequality, what would it mean for us to “turn the tables?”

Jesus countered not only the prevailing view of his day, but the prevailing view of our day. We have not been called to competition, but to communion. We have not been called to celebrate our accomplishments, but to celebrate the singular accomplishment of Christ in laying down the favour of the world (at the cost of his own life) in order to visit the world with the favour of God - a favour bestowed on all the world for the sake of all the world - a favour that seeks justice, mercy, and humility in all our ways, for this is the way of Christ. Amen.

Acknowledging Inspiration from:

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Toronto Star material on the upcoming Superbowl