

Attitudes and the Beatitudes

by Rev. Joseph Connolly

“...the whole crowd was trying to touch Jesus for power came out of the Rabbi healing them all. Then Jesus looked at the disciples and said:...” — Luke 6:19-20a.

I have oftentimes regaled you with stories of my faith journey, my faith background or rather I should put that in the plural: my backgrounds. Briefly, I grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition, moved over to the Episcopalian tradition and wound up in the Congregational tradition.

I then went to Bangor Seminary where I had classmates across numerous traditions from Roman Catholic to Baptist to Unitarian to Quaker. In that situation one cannot avoid learning about how things are seen in these various faith traditions.

Just being in class with people from all those backgrounds is informative and stimulating. Outside the classroom conversations are simply amazing.

Given that background and education, it should not surprise you that I know, maintain contacts and friendships with folks across that spectrum. And so I want to tell a story about an Episcopal priest I knew.

He was a British national but had been ordained in the American Episcopal Church. He had been serving a church in Louisiana, all the way down on the delta. Then he got called to serve a church in New York City. Louisiana — New York City— these are two different worlds.

How different? The service in an Episcopal Church has about 40 or 45 minutes of just liturgy. The celebration of Communion is a given at nearly every main service.

Well, when serving that church in Louisiana if this priest did not preach for at least one hour at each of those services, the parishioners would have run him out of town. Once in New York City, if the sermon of this priest ran a half a second past twenty minutes, the parishioners would have run him out of town.

Please notice, what I just said has nothing to do with the theology, liturgy or preaching in an Episcopal Church. It does not even say anything about ‘what makes a good sermon?’

All this is totally and inexorably tied up in the culture of the churches that priest served. I don’t think I am telling any secrets if I said the culture on opposite sides of the Mason-Dixon line is a tad different.

In short, local church culture overrules and overcomes practice, sometimes theology, but certainly denominational norms. And this story more so about local culture, the culture in those two particular churches served by that priest and about how the local culture in those specific places holds sway, than it is even about that North-South divide. I know that because I know Episcopal Churches in New York City. I know Episcopal Churches where the sermon can’t be longer than ten minutes. I know Episcopal Churches in New York City where the sermon probably needs to be thirty minutes. (Slight pause.)

As I indicated earlier, this last week Saint Valentine’s Day was celebrated— cupids, flowers, candy, fancy dinners. [1] That’s the way it’s done, is it not? That’s the way we celebrate Saint Valentine’s Day, right? (Slight pause.)

Say what? Saint Valentine was a 3rd-century Roman priest, a bishop who ministered to persecuted Christians, a

servant of God martyred for this work. For the life of me I cannot find the connection with Saint Valentine, a martyred priest and bishop and the thing we do with cupids, flowers, candy, fancy dinners. (Slight pause.) Can you say ‘it’s the culture?’

The way Saint Valentine’s day is celebrated is certainly *not* about the person whose name is fixed on that date. This, therefore, does need to be noticed: the culture finds excuses and fixates on specific ways of doing something just because the culture wants to do it that way, even when doing it the way the culture wants to do it makes absolutely no sense.

So, what should we call this? I’ve got it! Fake news— let’s call it fake news. (Slight pause.) No— I think someone has used that label already— probably not a good idea. (Slight pause.)

These words are found in the Gospel of Luke: “...the whole crowd was trying to touch Jesus for power came out of the Rabbi healing them all. Then Jesus looked at the disciples and said:...” (Long pause.)

I think most of you know since we publish this fact in our Newsletter, there is a Revised Common Lectionary, a list of recommended readings for each Sunday in the Liturgical Year. Among the readings this week three of the four assigned readings contain beatitudes. But what is a beatitude?

In the reading from Jeremiah we heard the Prophet say, “Blessed are those who / put their trust in *Yahweh*, God, / whose hope is with *Yahweh*, God.” In the Luke reading we heard Jesus insist, “You who are poor are blessed, / for the reign of God is yours.”

However and equally we heard Jeremiah say, “The human heart is devious / more deceitful / than anything else; / it is desperately sick—...” And then Jesus says, “...woe to you who are rich, / for you are now receiving / your consolation, your comfort / in full.”

This should be abundantly clear: a beatitude is not simply a declaration of something good or special or nice. And that is precisely why I started my comments with these specific words from *Sermon on the Plain*: “Then Jesus looked at the disciples and said:...” then I stopped. (Long pause.)

Question: what is Jesus doing here? What was Jeremiah doing? To what and to where are Jeremiah and Jesus trying to point us? What are we being told when we hear beatitudes? The evidence suggests it’s not simply about good, special or nice. (Slight pause.)

Theologian Richard Rhor claims the message God has for us is transformative because God is transformative. Therefore, in order to be faithful we need to strive to be transformed ourselves. [2]

Certainly one of our issues with God Who is transformative, one of the reasons we grapple to understand God as transformative, this God Who invites *us* to be transformed, is we get tied up in the messages with which our culture surrounds us. These cultural messages tend to be aimed at maintaining the status quo, making things just like they used to be in some imaginary time past when things were perfect. I’m historian. I’m still looking for that time when things were perfect. (Slight pause.)

Coming back to the culture and to be clear, when I use the word ‘culture’ it applies to a multitude of levels. It applies to global culture, national culture, regional culture, local culture. I highlighted the Valentine’s celebration and the sermons in two Episcopal Churches as examples because one is national and one is quite local.

The *New York Times* recently published an article by a Dutch national who was here for graduate studies. She wrote about the Valentine's Day festivities of cupids, flowers, candy, fancy dinners and her lack of understanding these.

Her spouse, an Israeli also here for graduate studies, for whom these rituals also seemed alien, was pressured by friends into bring her flowers and chocolate. He did. She was horrified.

She threatened divorce if he ever again brought overpriced roses or chocolates to her in mid-February. He was happy about that since all he wanted to do in mid-February was to concentrate on graduate work, study, research.

In the article her comments said these rituals try to perpetuate a lethal combination of Hollywood sentimentality and Victorian romanticism. She objected to the tyranny of perfect romance.

She prefers a flawed relationship over the fairy tale love of candlelight dinners, red roses, walks on the beach. To her imperfect love seems preferable to that. [3]

I am reminded lyricist Ira Gershwin, someone well known for writing love songs, wrote these words to a tune by his brother George in all the way back in 1931. It was meant to illustrate this dichotomy between romanticism and the reality of relationship by employing irony.

(Quote:) "Blah, blah, blah, blah— moon / Blah, blah, blah— above / Blah, blah, blah, blah— croon / Blah, blah, blah— love. / Tra la, la, la; tra la, la, la— merry month of May / Tra la, la, la; tra la, la, la— 'neath a cloud of grey." [4] There are another couple of choruses but you get the idea and I don't meant to bore you. (Slight pause.)

As to the culture of the local church, the story of the local differences between sermon length, it speaks about the need for the local church to see beyond its own walls. I think we are not terrible at that. But we can always be better on many, many levels.

This brings me back to the reflections of Richard Rhor on God, the God Who we Christians claim is transformative, the God Who we Christians claim can help us transform. Indeed, I want to suggest any beatitude we find in Scripture is not there to point to something good, special or nice.

That should be evident precisely because of the dichotomies heard in the beatitudes found in both Jeremiah and in the *Sermon on the Plain*. The place to which beatitudes point is in no way the kind of world our culture sees. The place to which beatitudes point is not the kind of world we see in front of us. The place to which beatitudes point is the kind of world God sees, God envisions.

And that is our challenge in a nutshell. The kind of world God sees, God envisions, is one where we put our trust and hope in *Yahweh*, God.

The kind of world God sees, the kind of world God envisions, is one where the hungry are fed. The kind of world God sees, the kind of world God envisions, is one where the equity, peace, justice, freedom, joy, hope, peace and love of God reigns. The question for us is can we also see, envision the kind of world which encompasses God's vision. Your call. Amen.

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York
02/17/2019

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Those of you who know me well know I often use the word covenant. What does it mean to covenant with God? Here’s the short version: it means we commit to growth—spiritual growth, growth in understanding, growth in wisdom, growth in love. Covenant means we strive to refuse to be trapped by our human failings, trapped by our culture.”

BENEDICTION: Depart in peace for God’s promised covenant is real and is forever. And may the love of God guide us, the word of the Christ empower us and the gifts of the Spirit dwell in us, this day and forever more. Amen.

[1] At the Children’s time the pastor gave out heart shaped things and asked of this showed love. These theologically astute children said “no.” God shows love and helping each other shows love.

[2] <https://cac.org/personal-and-universal-2019-02-15/>

[3]

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/08/well/family/against-romance-an-un-valentine.html?fallback=0&recId=1HDWlqe73QC4MojjT4yPF1WFJzo&locked=0&geoContinent=NA&geoRegion=NY&recAlloc=home-geo&geoCountry=US&blockId=home-living-vi&imp_id=66027691&action=click&module=Smarter%20Living&pgtype=Homepage

[4] <https://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/b/blahblahblah.html>
The song is *Blah, Blah, Blah*. It was in the 1931 film *Delicious*.