

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Increased Risk

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Think about how the ladders you've climbed in your life formed you.

Let's begin with the literal, physical strength as you matured from toddler to youth. You grasped ahold of the coffee table, pulled yourself up, and walked. With balance, you risked putting one foot on the bottom rung of a stool or ladder, stabilized yourself, to step up again, and reach the top. Then the thrill of sliding down, encouraging you forward.

Consider the figurate ladders in school. You learned the alphabet, deciphered words to read books and compose your thoughts. A similar ladder exists with numbers/math and physic/biology.

An entry-level job formed you before you moved up in your career with wisdom and influence.

Later you may take for granted the pain and courage to get there, but you don't leave anything behind. And, those who earn their wisdom and humility, one step at a time, know that you just don't leap from one rung to another.

Over these past weeks, the sermons on the beatitudes from the Gospel of Matthew pointed to just how radical Jesus' blessings were for those long ignored or excluded.

Each blessing wraps a divine arm around someone the world had thrown away or told did not measure up in the current rank and file set of values. And, throughout the ages, Jesus' blessings are seen to form a ladder. If you've known what it means to be poor in spirit, and remain open to receive the kingdom of God, you are blessed. Then, when your heart breaks in grief, you welcome God's comfort. If you offer mercy to others to begin again, you know just what a blessing it is to receive mercy yourself and a renewed relationship with God.

As you listen to Jesus' blessings, consider how they build.

Please pray with me.

Dear God, after years of hearing the words spoken by your son, we may become immune to their potency – to comfort and inspire. Help us to set aside our perceived understanding and send your spirit to this place that we become startled as those who first heard your son speak. Help us to move from hearing, to believing, and from believing to being your children.

Hear again Jesus speak from the Gospel of Matthew as I read from the fifth chapter.

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

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

I stopped short of all the blessings because I want to talk today about the peacemakers and do so by way of a few stories.

I’ll never forget the first sermon I preached at the last church I served. I tried to ignore my anxiety as I stepped into the pulpit, adjusted my stole and microphone, and began to speak to a packed sanctuary.

Bob, a long-time member and former leader of the church, sat about a third of the way from the back. Although well into his eighties, his 6’3’ frame exuded a formidable presence, even while seated.

About a few phrases into the sermon, he interrupted the stillness of the sanctuary with a big booming voice, “I cannot hear you.”

I wanted to sink.

Many in the congregation later confided they too wanted to retreat from his line of fire. They knew what Bob was capable of. His demands. His tirades.

He’d retired after a long career, rising to be chairman and CEO of a multi-national manufacturer. In addition to his corporate work, he served on the boards of several universities, think tanks, and civic organizations. He earned a reputation for asking blunt questions and calling foul when he thought an idea untenable. I also learned from those who served on boards with him that he was usually right.

I didn’t know any of that at the time. After he called me out, I made a few adjustments on the fly and continued with the sermon.

After the service, rather than slink away, I met Bob, endured his reprimand, and we began what became a close relationship.

The company he led manufactured ordinances, a variety of bombs, tanks, armored personnel carriers, and weaponry sold to our military and to our country's allies.

Upon his retirement, he authorized a biography adorned with photos taken of him with heads of state with whom he'd negotiated over the years, members of our department of defense, and elected leaders.

After a few visits, I expected to be quizzed about the paint color and camouflage markings of the tanks they'd sold for desert combat. Did I appreciate the color of sand varies more than that of grass?

We talked about faith. A lot.

He wanted to know how I was willing to preach about an incarnation and an empty tomb. Wasn't I risking public ridicule of my intellect? (As an aside, preaching Jesus' birth and Easter resurrection might be challenging but are not the riskiest sermons compared with forgiveness or justice.)

After poking me, he too confided the mystery of Jesus' divine nature defies human comprehension. We believe and accept that even the brightest minds cannot grasp the breadth of God.

Our conversation topics progressed.

He knew the dark night of the soul. He grieved the death of his wife. Amidst all the hubris, he confided humility. He marveled at God's creation from traveling to the far reaches of the globe.

Over the decades, he still struggled with Jesus' teachings; the commands to welcome the immigrant, feed the hungry, stand for justice to those long denied. Those didn't seem fair. Why should he be expected to surrender wealth for someone he does not know? But, it is also not fair for someone born into oppression and marginalized their entire lives.

He asked hard questions.

How does one set aside everything we know to be true about this world and become a peacemaker?

Making peace sounds noble but the reality to reach out to an enemy, to love an enemy, asks us to risk it all. All aspects of security – social, political, physical.

He's right to ask that question. And, yet he kept coming back.

Peacemakers. The Greek word Jesus uses means more than an absence of conflict. It calls for the pursuit of harmony,

wholeness, and justice. The person is literally a “doer of peace.”

Throughout most of the history of interpreting this blessing, first a person makes peace with God.

This is one of the reasons, some contend the blessings in the Gospel of Matthew build, one upon another.

If you are poor in spirit and find the kingdom of God – meaning Jesus – comes to you, you realize that in the depth of despair, God did not will the tragedy, just the opposite, God pursues you.

Those who become aware of God blessing through the trials of life – grief and humility – grow to trust how much they depend upon God. They understand God always holds their lives in the palm of God’s hand. They make peace with God.

The more they make peace with and trust God, the closer they become to God. From this intimacy, they learn to look at the world through the eyes of God. They become part of God – a child of God – doing the holy work because they know what it means for God and those whom God loves.

They dispense with the world’s conventional wisdom “to play it safe,” or “go along just to get along.”

Peacemakers seek to create the conditions that make violence less likely.

The temptation to demonize our opponents is so strong. Can we imagine stretching a hand across hostile political boundaries?

It will take real courage to see God's image in someone we bitterly disagree with, or in someone who holds a view so deeply offensive to us, and to reach out, willing to listen.¹

This is the irony; the act of peacemaking usually entails disrupting the fabricated status quo. Peacemakers ask the tough questions and wait to for answers. Peacemakers stand alongside those who remain silent at the luxury of others. They seek justice before a revolution begins. Peacemakers willingly risk it all with the confidence this world can be a better place.

They know that once war rages, peacemaking becomes far more costly.

On this first anniversary of the war against Ukraine, with thousands of bodies buried by both sides, we know that when peacemaking fails, we sacrifice our sons and daughters, robbing the future with the apathy of today.

¹ Rebekah Eckland, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans, 2002), 236-258 and James Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006) influenced my interpretation.

I'll close with a story of a grand gesture to make peace.

But before you attempt anything this risky, think of peacemaking also as a ladder. It often starts at home and with friends. It begins by standing up to “we’ve always done it this way” when you know it hurts others or yourself. Your silence previously implied your support, now you speak up.

Peacemakers no longer shy away from bullies.

I'll admit, bullies scare me. But I'm tired of stewing about their pain when I know they don't care about or actually intend to cause hurt by the way they slam fists on tables in meetings and belittle others. They foreclose possibilities.

Think of the ways you may make peace by stirring trouble. Asking questions. Speaking the truth.

This is my last story.

Eight days after the good people of Mother Emmanuel AME church in Charleston were killed during a Bible Study, Bree Newsome and James Tyson met for breakfast at an IHOP in Columbia, SC. Tyson, a young white man, taught Newsome, a young black woman how to scale a flagpole. They conspired to remove the confederate flag that had flown over the state capital.

Some called it a symbol of southern heritage. Blacks and many whites saw it as a symbol of racist oppression – shouting silently “don’t think you are free or equal while this flag adorns the government.”

After coffee and pancakes, they received a call from fellow collaborator to start their plan. You know what happened, Newsome scaled the pole, removing the flag.

Bree Newsom later said:

I had no doubt about the decision that I had made at the time, but that didn't mean that I was oblivious to how dangerous it was and so it really did require faith on my part. I very much believe that God called me to scale the flagpole that day and I believe that God would bring me safely down. But faith is something that we practice, so even in that moment just praying and staying focused and calling out to God was very important.

James Tyson stands in this story – he taught her to climb, he remained with her, inside the fence when she scaled the pole.

And when he saw the police planned to use a Taser on the flagpole, he placed his hand on it. If they tried to hurt her,

they'd hurt him in the process.² No one was hurt. Sure, they were both arrested. That flag was never raised again over the seat of government.

Hear the rest of the ladder of blessings from Matthew's gospel:

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

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

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

² Markeshia Ricks, "History Didn't Just Happen, *New Haven Independent*, January 25, 2018, https://www.newhavenindependent.org/article/bree_newsom and Lottie Joiner, "Bree Newsom reflects on taking down South Carolina's Confederate flag 2 years ago, *VOX*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/6/27/15880052/bree-newsom-south-carolinas-confederate-flag>

These blessings are not commands, just blessings.

But once you move closer to God from being poor in spirit and receiving mercy, you continue. As you do so, you find yourself in the family of faith. Be a blessed child of God. Trouble making. Peacemaking.



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