

Blessed [Scott Kinder-Pyle]

Matthew 5:1—12; 1 Corinthians 1:18—31

It sounds strange to say, but one of the teaching techniques of Jesus is to leave his disciples ALMOST in the lurch. That's a phrase that may not be too common these days, but to leave someone in the lurch is to seemingly abandon them—and to abandon them suddenly—with assistance in a precarious or in a confusing situation. Once, for example, a man by the name of John Callahan, a friend of my parents, took me sailing in the Chesapeake Bay. And to make a long story short, he skillfully maneuvered this wind-blown, one-mast boat into the shipping lanes... and then he flipped it over. In other words, the hull and the rudder were pointed toward the sky, and the sails and the mast were submerged beneath the surface of the water. And I can remember, floating there, with my life jacket up around my ears, but feeling as if I had been left in the lurch—almost. To be sure, I wasn't totally abandoned; but Mr. Callahan and I were out there, vulnerable, with these massive cargo ships churning up waves around us. And what really confused me was that Mr. Callahan, who would later die of cancer, seemed to do it on purpose. Jesus teaches like that. He teaches by leaving his disciples—and us—ALMOST in the lurch; and maybe someday, it will feel as if we're totally in the lurch. Who knows?

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them...”

The fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel has a context that matters, and should matter to us—and that is the “*crowds*.” Diseased and demon-possessed people have gathered for healings and for miraculous cures. But rather than bask in the hype and the hoopla, the disciples of Jesus, who've been following at a rapid pace, now settle in for some ‘in-the-lurch’ teaching.

Now, I refer to what Jesus says in verses three through twelve as ‘in-the-lurch’ because everything has been turned upside-down. “***Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek...***” All this, you see, is upside down from the Roman Empire’s method of looking at things. And it’s also upside down from a way of teaching—teaching about what it means to be a good citizen and teaching about religious devotion. Jesus is ostensibly maneuvering these fishermen-followers into the middle of the mighty and bustling Empire of Ego, and he’s capsizing the apparatus of power-brokers like Herod Antipas in Jerusalem or like the Great Caesar in Rome. He’s turning the ‘what’s-in-this-for-me’ mentality on its head. And so, it’s not the self-assured and over-confident who are blessed, but the poor in spirit. It’s not those who’ve never known loss who are blessed, but those who truly mourn their losses. It’s not those who conquer and deprive others of their safety and security who will be empowered to inherit the earth; it’s the meek.

Every once in a while, I’ll become involved in a conversation with a really happy-go-lucky, everything’s-coming-up roses sort of person who claims Jesus as their Lord and Savior. And I’ll say, ‘How you doing?’ And in the response, what I hear is, ‘I’m blessed...’ But don’t you see? I think Jesus wants to teach us—if you’re claiming to be blessed by God—and not simply the self-blessing of your own ego—there’s got to be a few layers. The biblical tradition does not define blessing as a divine favorability rating. Abraham and Sarah are blessed to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12). Jacob wrestles with an angel and is blessed with hip-displacement for the rest of his life (Genesis 32:25). Jesus has inherited and passes on this ‘in-the-lurch’ and upside-down teaching. And I believe he wants us to learn it for our own good.

Some of you may recognize the name ‘Philip Yancey.’ He used to be editor of *Christianity Today*, and through the years he’s written several best-selling Christian books, including “*What’s So Amazing About Grace.*” And yes, countless people have been blessed with what Philip Yancey has written. For instance, in “*Where is God When It Hurts,*” he describes how his work as a journalist has offered him the chance to interview both ‘stars’ and ‘servants.’ And then he says, “Yet I must tell you, in my limited experience, these ‘idols’ are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met. Most have troubled or broken marriages... [and] seem tormented by incurable self-doubt” [57]. But you see, for all these insights, here’s where the *blessedness* of Jesus hits home. On January 7, 2026, at age 76, Philip Yancey himself admitted to having an eight-year affair. His wife of 55 years is devastated, as are the other families involved. And Yancey himself, diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease, has realized there are layers upon layers to his *being blessed*. He is poor in spirit and he’s mourning; and now without writing another book or another word on the subject, he’s been left in the lurch—ALMOST in the lurch.

God’s Kingdom—the spiritual realm that’s mentioned in Matthew 5:3 and 5:10—is not identical with the popularity contest of the culture at large. And even the popularity contest of the religious culture or the so-called Christian subculture. “***Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.***” That verse as well reverses how we typically operate. Typically-speaking, those who are blessed can sit talk about the Seahawks without worrying about being arbitrarily deported, and those who are blessed can plan their next cruise on the Caribbean. Nothing’s wrong with that per se. But listen to what Jesus teaches: it’s NOT the buffet eaters, the caviar-snackers or the wine connoisseurs who are blessed.

The other day I was watching a documentary on the archeology around the ancient Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Pompeii, of course, was named after a famous military officer and political opponent of Julius Caesar. Herculaneum, as you may have guessed, came to fame by honoring the heroic myth of the strongman, Hercules. But when the volcano erupted on October 24 in the year 79 CE (and the lava flowed for days after), the stuff buried there—and today excavated from there—tells the story of a Blessing Factory. Venus, Mars, Artemis, Apollo, Osiris and Mithras would supposedly deliver on the blessings of health, wealth and prosperity. And I wonder about that—just as I wonder about the evidence of indentured servitude and slavery and keeping the conquered people conquered. And yet—

*“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.”*

Tom Long characterizes these lines as a *Preamble to the Constitution of the Kingdom of God*. But notice it's *not* a declaration of independence. We don't, according to Jesus, hold the abstract truths of showing mercy. Mercy isn't always self-evident. God has to transform us. God has to turn the sailboat upside down. And as far as being endowed by the Creator with 'certain inalienable rights'—even non-residents of the United States are still made in the image of God. And maybe it's only the "*pure in heart*" who can see that. Moreover, as Jesus calls the peacemakers blessed, he's not going to guarantee a Nobel Peace Prize. He's often going to leave them in the lurch. Or ALMOST—Philippians 4:7 describes how the Spirit of Christ grants us "*peace that surpasses all understanding*"—so if we understand it as a silencing or a censoring or a not-listening to those with whom we disagree, that would be missing the point.

I don't know if anyone's been around the hallways of this church when the pre-school is in session, but it's not always strict tranquility. The other day I heard a child screaming his head off. And what I didn't hear in reply was beautiful. Apparently the teacher in the classroom listened, absorbed the onslaught of emotion. And then I heard, "Are you sad?" That's absolutely beautiful! What a blessing to be a blessing!

But here we go. Let's not stop there. Those who blessed aren't simply passive recipients. According to Jesus' words: we actually become active practitioners. ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake... Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account..."*** Notice now: it's becoming really personal. Jesus is no longer framing his statements in terms of ***"Blessed are the poor, the grief-stricken, the meek..."*** He's saying, ***"Blessed are you..."*** And that gives me the poetic license to say *YOU* to you. How are you doing, you members and friends of Northwood Presbyterian Church? Are you blessed? If so, let me remind you, to be blessed is to risk being persecuted, to risk being slandered, to risk being out there in the middle of the Empire of Ego, and then somehow floating free of your ego...

"At the end of the day, we have to adhere to policy," said Marcus Myers, who is the Chief Academic Officer for the West Ada School District in Idaho. And evidently, that policy applies to the middle-school children in the classroom of Sara Inama who was teaching them. Last spring Mrs Inama had displayed a poster that reads 'EVERYONE IS WELCOME HERE.' And it's that poster that both got her trouble—AND suggested how blessed she is.

You see, contrary to the policy, which stipulates that all such messaging needs to be “content neutral,” these words of inclusiveness and hospitality had been rendered alongside images of various hands; and it was because the hands had different skin colors that the poster needed to be taken down. Another sign-in-violation of policy read, ‘IN THIS ROOM EVERYONE IS WELCOME, IMPORTANT, VALUED, RESPECTED, EQUAL..’ and was also removed from the wall of the classroom. But teaching’s hard, isn’t it? Learning is hard, isn’t it? And it’s especially hard when it’s Jesus who is teaching what it means to be blessed. The school board initially pressured Mrs. Inama to take down the offensive posters. But she put them back up and lost her job.

She got out the scotch tape and the thumb tacks. And she put the hands with different skin-colors back on display. But now, as far as I know, she’s in the lurch. Almost. She’s almost in the lurch. Also, she’s among blessed.