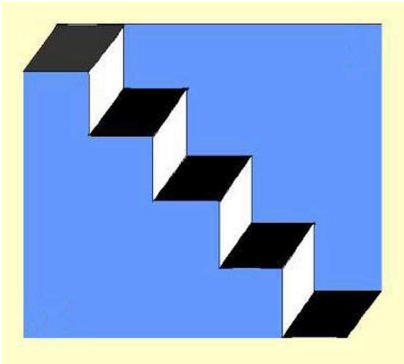


The Upside-Down Kingdom



In one of the Monty Python movies we see that someone portraying Jesus is preaching on a hillside in the distance, but the people in back of the crowd are too far away to hear what he's saying. One of them says: "I can't hear a word he's saying! What'd he just say?" The person next to him says, solemnly, "I think he said, Blessed are the cheese makers..."

Blessed are the cheese makers! Sometimes after a visit to the Thunder Oak Cheese Farm here in the Slate River Valley, I catch myself thinking the very same thing. All those wonderful cheeses that the equally wonderful Schep family makes there. Eat it with crackers and a glass of red wine, by yourself, with your spouse, or with good friends. But if I may give you some advice: stay away from the sampling tray; if you don't, I can guarantee you will leave with a lot more cheese than you had planned, and I speak from experience. Blessed are the cheese makers...

Unfortunately, that's not what the writer of Matthew's gospel actually wrote! "Blessed are the *peace makers*", we read there. Peacemaking is a much harder, much more dangerous, much more controversial occupation. Peacemakers often don't have much to show for their efforts. Rev. Joyce and Peter Fergus Moore told us something about the challenges they experienced in occupied Palestine. And with the most powerful nation in the world engaged in what they call "the war against terrorism", peacemakers are considered un-American cowards or even traitors.

Today's selection from the Gospel of Matthew is also known as "The Beatitudes", which simply means "the blessings" in Latin. We usually picture Jesus speaking to a large crowd of people from a hilltop, much like a pulpit. But that's not what Matthew says; in Matthew, the opposite happens: "When Jesus saw the crowds he went up a hill, where he sat down. He gathered his disciples around him, and he began to teach them." Jesus removed himself from the crowd by going up a hill, with only his disciples. There they sit down, and Jesus begins to teach them.

In Jesus' time, hilltops and mountaintops were sacred places because they were seen as closer to God. So if you had an important decision to make, that's where you went. It basically means: this is not about me, but about you, God. I need you to tell me what to do. Same for Jesus. Just think back of all the pivotal moments in his ministry, they almost always involve a hilltop or a mountaintop.

So that's where we find Jesus today: on a hilltop, sitting down with his disciples around him; a rabbi teaching his pupils. They know that this can only mean one thing: Jesus has something important to tell them, something in connection with God. And they're right.

Jesus starts to tell them who the truly blessed people are. All sorts of folks - but not the folks we would normally expect to be blessed. Jesus is not just handing out blessings here, like a pat on the head. What he is doing is he's talking about God's Kingdom.

What Jesus is teaching here is that the ones who are usually *not* blessed in life: the ones who struggle, the ones who are often outcast and don't fit in - they are the ones who are blessed in the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the downtrodden, the ones who struggle - kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the ones that hunger and thirst for righteousness. The merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted. And the ones who have lived for God or for others and have suffered for it, they shall receive in the kingdom of heaven.

Hear that refrain? "The Kingdom of Heaven", "The Kingdom of Heaven", God's Kingdom. One thing Jesus consistently proclaimed was that the Kingdom of Heaven was near, it was so close you could smell it - if you only knew where to look. But if we're honest, we too often look for it in all the wrong places. So Jesus tells us, it's in you, and you and you. You'd notice it if only you'd listen to what God is telling you, if only you'd pay attention to what I am all about. We talked about that last week.

And today he gives us even more clues of where to look. You know where you can find God's Kingdom? he asks. In the ones we tend to overlook, the people we consider a waste of our time, the ones we'd rather avoid because their lives are a mess. *They* are the ones who are important to God. *They* are the ones whom God has called us to serve: the homeless, the depressed, the hopeless, the hungry, the refugees of war - *they* are the ones who shall inherit the kingdom of God - if we do the work of God.

Well, all that is news to the disciples. This is the opposite of what they had always heard and assumed. They had always been told that it was the rich people who were blessed, the healthy people, the comfortable ones, those who were secure with their job and families, smart people, the folks for whom life was a breeze. Clearly they were blessed!

And here is Jesus putting that idea on its head - like those drawings of faces we saw earlier this morning. You think it's one thing, but then you turn it on

its head - and it turns out to be something else entirely. The last shall be first, and the weak shall be strong...

And you know what? Those are exactly the people who had been following him. Simple folks, poor peasants and fishermen, women, folks who are beaten up by the Romans and kept obedient by the temple priests. Folks like tax collectors, losers and hopeless cases. Jesus looks at them and says, "God's Kingdom is all about you - not about the fat cats and the idle rich, not the folks who live comfortable lives. It's you."

These beatitudes, these blessings, are not aimed at people in general, but rather to the Christian community. They speak of the blessing of those who live out God's reign they are blessed in God's eyes, even though the world may not call them blessed.

The beatitudes proclaim that God's blessing is on those who find themselves in these situations because they are Christ's disciples. Because they follow Christ's example.

Christ invites us to look at our lives in a completely different way; to turn upside-down what the world thinks is normal. And suddenly, our lives are not about money and success, comfort or power - but about caring for each other, and focussing on God's Kingdom which is already happening all around us. That's where we will find ourselves truly blessed. Its part of the paradox of the gospel that it is only in losing our lives that we will find what we need, and in giving that we receive what we need.

Of course we cannot do this on our own. And that's okay. All we are asked to do is to trust, and "to do justice, to love kindness, and walk humbly with our God", just like we heard the prophet Micah say this morning. And when we do, we'll find ourselves carried by the presence of the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit. We'll find ourselves on a surprising journey, making God's Kingdom a bit more of a reality, with every step we take.

Today I'm inviting you to ask yourself what *your* next step will be. Starting this week, what can you do that says "no" to the way of this world, and a resounding "yes!!" to God's Kingdom. What will *you* be turning upside-down? Amen.