

You've got to hand it to Jesus. He managed to get himself accused of being both naïvely idealistic and cynically heartless by preaching these verses, which are also quite popular in other circles. That's the trouble with the Beatitudes, as we call them, because Western Christians became familiar with the Latin word for "blessed," *beatus*. Most Christians like the sound of these statements, but few seem to think deeply about them. I think most Christians would find it difficult to answer the simple question, "What are the Beatitudes," in the sense of, what is their genre? And what's the point? Since they are a set of short statements about different categories of people and follow a pattern, some people might say they are Jesus's version of the Ten Commandments. But that can't possibly be right, and not just because there are only eight Beatitudes.

The big difference, though, is not numerical. The Ten Commandments are, well, commands. They are phrased in the imperative. And they do not say what consequences will ensue from following them, or not. When Jesus did give his followers a new commandment, he was very clear about it, saying, "*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.*" But the Beatitudes are descriptive, not prescriptive. They talk about people in different circumstances, rather than commanding anyone to do, or not to do, anything.

However, there is far more to the Jewish scriptures than laws and commandments, and Jesus drew heavily on those scriptures in composing the Beatitudes. And that wasn't just because he was a rabbi, accustomed to drawing on these texts. Jesus needed to make sure his statements would hold up to the most intense scrutiny.

That's because Jesus was, in the Beatitudes and in much of his teaching, articulating a message and vision whose values are thoroughly scriptural, and therefore, deeply countercultural. Human nature being what it is, the idea had taken hold that the wealthy, powerful, and privileged, who were the only ones who had time to study scripture extensively, were wealthy, powerful, and privileged *because* of their extensive study, which led to them leading more virtuous lives, which led to God rewarding them with wealth, power, and privilege. Don't think about that too hard. At least, the elite wouldn't have wanted you to, because it's one big circle. More importantly, that circle is used to project the values of humanity onto God. Of course, if God operates the same way as society, rewarding those who are already elite, then what's the point of worshiping God or learning what God wants us to do, let alone trying to live a Godly life?

Jesus exposes that worldliness as the selfish rationalization it is. Re-presenting concepts from Isaiah, the Psalms, and Proverbs, and drawing on the tradition of specific blessings from Genesis, Job, Daniel, and Sirach, Jesus reminds his audience of one of the overarching themes of Judaism, the suffering of the righteous and God's loving deliverance of them. His audience easily could have contrasted this teaching with the self-serving ideology perpetuated by the world's elite and without a doubt understood

which was actually part of God's plan.

You can probably see for yourselves how Jesus could be criticized as naïve for teaching that those who are weak and disfavored in social terms are actually blessed, although that criticism seems less compelling in light of the rich Biblical traditions on which the Beatitudes are based and the sophisticated way Jesus integrated them. I also began this sermon by suggesting that Jesus also opened himself up to the opposite criticism, of being cynically heartless, by preaching them.

That criticism seems to be a more modern attack, although the Bible does say "there is nothing new under the sun." The cynical interpretation of the Beatitudes comes from interpreting them as apocalyptic — in the sense of talking about what God will do later. The problem being that they *could* be used, out of context, to tell people who are weak, suffering, or disfavored that they will be taken care of eventually, so there's no need to seek justice or betterment now.

And I think this argument has some credibility, in that I think Jesus's preaching was frequently apocalyptic, and the Beatitudes are an example. While I don't disagree with the thesis that the Beatitudes express a set of values that are relevant and transformational in their hearing, I also take the promises Jesus makes in them, promises of future justice and reconciliation, at face value. It's certainly true that an overemphasis on the goodness of heaven can create an opportunity, or even a justification, for terrible injustices on earth, but we only recognize injustice because God has revealed standards of justice to humanity, both in the inspiration of Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, all that being said, just because a text or anything else is used irresponsibly or maliciously doesn't mean that it's inherently bad. Apocalyptic texts are powerful and provocative, so it's not surprising that they have gotten more than their fair share of misunderstanding and abuse. And somewhat ironically, the whole point of the apocalyptic genre is to encourage the faithful to stay faithful and continue pursuing God's goals. People who use apocalyptic texts to call for complacency completely miss the point, and knowingly or not, ally themselves with the very forces Jesus showed to be corrupt and corrupting.

I think a great example of the correct use of apocalypticism, albeit in secular terms, is in the call of the family of Tyre Nichols to protest his killing, but to do so peacefully. His family might well trust that regardless of what happens in the cases against the officers, Tyre Nichols and the officers charged with his murder will know justice in the next life. But clearly, at the same time, the family desires human activity with a goal of enacting enduring justice, expressing an element of faith and hope that a peaceful response will achieve that goal.

Or in theological terms, just because we believe that justice is only made perfect in heaven, where it is both universal and tempered with mercy and grace, that doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't strive for justice, mercy, and grace on earth. On the

contrary, even if the best we can hope for this side of heaven is a shadow or image of the heavenly order, the prophet Micah points out that God has gone to great lengths to build up justice, righteousness, and faithfulness on earth, and God calls us to join with God in that task. While it is very good news indeed that God will make everything OK in the end, the Beatitudes and all of Jesus's teachings set high standards for us, rather than sanctioning complacency.

Our confidence in God's power and grace should dispel our fear, and should help us stay focused on God's overall mission of reconciliation and our own specific roles therein. We at Advent have to confront a difficult reality, albeit nothing as grievous as the death of Tyre Nichols. But Jesus's lesson from the Beatitudes is no less relevant for us. The realities Jesus mentions and alludes to are serious, but they are no match for the love of God, and the transformational potential of faithful people who have put their trust in God. Our church is facing a serious situation, but we are facing it, and at our parish meeting after church today, I'll tell you some of the ways in which, I think, everything can be OK. See you there.