

It's no secret that our American culture is filled with a diverse tapestry of humanity. We value diversity and multiculturalism because our country consists of people who literally come from practically every tribe and nation that you can think of. In many areas you're as likely to hear someone speaking Spanish in the grocery store as you would the local American English dialect, for example (be it "Y'all" or ""Yous guys"). Our cities are populated by a patchwork of ethnic neighborhoods, and walking down the street can often seem like a tour of the world and its peoples.

Nowadays, as certain individuals find themselves unable to accept this reality, one could argue that no matter where we live, or what ethnic tribe we're from, we all live under the same blue sky in God's good creation. And while we may, at times, pay attention to the differences in our culture, language, and race, God tends to evaluate us based on characteristics that are more than skin deep. Indeed, in Matthew's gospel this evening, Jesus reveals that God defines the world much differently than we do, and is remaking the world in such a way that it defines God's people by their character and conduct more than their heritage.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus redefines what it means to be a citizen of God's new world -- a world Jesus called "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven." And who are the people of God's new world? While we all may look different on the surface, and speak a different language, Jesus reveals at the very beginning of his discourse that there are certain traits that will be common to all of those who are becoming part of God's new kingdom.

Look closely at the Beatitudes and you might notice that they actually build on one another. In fact, the 20th-century missionary, E. Stanley Jones, observed that you could divide these nine Beatitudes into three sets of three, with each set of three Beatitudes following the same pattern: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. And when we look at them in this way, we begin to see that Jesus is

laying the foundation for citizenship in God's new world, which he will flesh out in the rest of his "sermon."

The first three traits that begin to lay the groundwork for us, start with Jesus' declaration, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Plenty of people have debated what the Lord meant by the "poor in spirit," but here's where looking at context can help us. Matthew's gospel was written to a Jewish audience and is aimed at telling us that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David and son of Abraham, and that he's the one who fulfills the law by embodying it. So...when Jesus talks about the poor in spirit, our clue to understanding what that means is found within the context of his own life and character. If we want to know what being poor in spirit looks like, we turn to Jesus as the first example.

In chapter 3, we read about Jesus' baptism, where the voice of God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well-pleased." That's an echo back to Isaiah 42:1, when God is speaking to the figure called the Suffering Servant. Right at the outset, Jesus, the king of God's new world, is marked as a servant who came to give his life for the world. Jesus then immediately *obeys* the Spirit in chapter 4 and goes out into the wilderness where he engages in radical self-denial.

To be "poor in spirit" combines these three traits of Jesus: servanthood, obedience, and self-denial. The one who is poor in spirit recognizes that he or she has nothing to offer God on his or her own, that his or her life has no purpose apart from God. They obey God not out of obligation, but out of a desire to gain something better -- the life of God's new world. The poor in spirit are those who voluntarily empty themselves so that they can be filled by God.

This leads us to the second beatitude, which focuses the attention from the inward to the outward: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Disciples who are poor in spirit, who have turned their attention away

from themselves, now turn their attention to the world and begin to see it as it currently is -- a world in pain, a world where the selfish desire of sin dehumanizes people, a world full of violence, a world that has given up hope of redemption. Those who mourn are blessed because they are able to enter into the world's pain and grief and are not afraid of it.

Synthesize these two beatitudes together and you get the third: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." We tend to think of meekness as wimpyness, as though our lives could be written as a "Diary of a Wimpy Christian." But here meekness is a combination of the previous two elements: the power of self-denial in the poor in spirit, and the passion for the pain of the world in those who mourn. Those who both want nothing from the world, while at the same time are willing to share everything with it, are the meek. The spirit of self-denial, and the spirit of service, come together to make a new being -- the most formidable person on earth -- because they want nothing, hence they can't be tempted or bought, and because they are willing to go to any lengths, even unto death, on behalf of others.

With the image of those who are "meek" still fresh in our minds, Jesus then turns to another set of three beatitudes that follow the same pattern: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" as the thesis. "Blessed are the merciful" as the antithesis; and "Blessed are the pure in heart" as the synthesis. Whereas the first three beatitudes gave us a pattern for emptying ourselves, these next three teach us what we are to be filled with.

Another way of translating the Greek word for righteousness is "justice." Justice takes the meaning of righteousness out of the realm of the individual, and into the realm of the whole world. The people of God's world aren't just those who do good; they do good for a purpose -- to bring God's justice into the world. In other words, they are the ones who see their lives within the context of God's larger

mission of redeeming the whole world. They do the will of God, but they see God's will as being bigger than themselves. They're not as concerned about their own eternal destiny, as they are about the destiny of the whole of creation. They're less focused on justifying themselves, than participating in God's justice for those who need it most. Sounds a lot like Jesus doesn't it?

But righteousness by itself can easily turn into Pharisaic self-righteousness. That's why we need the balancing of the second beatitude in this set of three: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." Those who have hungered and thirsted for God's justice must begin to show mercy to those who need that justice the most. When you put a passion for justice, and a compassion for mercy together, you become the "pure in heart," or the "undivided in heart."

They are the ones who are blessed to "see God" because they see the movement of God, and the purpose of God, in every person. They see God everywhere because they are always looking for ways in which to live out God's purpose through obedience, mercy, service, and love. They see God the way Jesus said they would -- in the face of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the least, the last, and the lost.

"Blessed are the peacemakers"; "Blessed are those who are persecuted;" and "Blessed are you when people insult you." Take the meek who want nothing from the world, and the pure in heart who want nothing but God. Put them together and you get peacemakers!

The peacemakers are the ones who are active in their pursuit of reconciliation and justice between humans in conflict with each other, whether the conflict is between families, races, cultures, or countries. The peacemakers, in other words, are those who stand in the gap and are willing to engage conflict with peace, to work for justice, and stay in that gap for as long as is necessary, despite

the sabotage that will inevitably come from those who are unmotivated or unwilling to change.

History often tells us that anyone who acts as a peacemaker will usually become one of the persecuted. Jesus is the ultimate example of that truth. As E. Stanley Jones once put it, "Peacemakers must get used to the sight of their own blood."

That being said, if there's a synthesis for this final triad of beatitudes, it is in Jesus' concluding remarks. If you're a peacemaker, if you're a persecuted peacemaker, and if you're a lied-about, trash-talked, persecuted peacemaker, well then, basically, you can start rejoicing. In other words, the synthesis is joy. The fruit of living a peacemaking, persecuted life, a life that embodies all of the qualities of faith that Jesus itemizes in this list we call the Beatitudes, is JOY. Persecuted peacemakers, in particular, can rejoice because they're persecuted for doing something worth persecuting! They rejoice because they are walking directly in the footsteps of Jesus and the prophets. They rejoice because their peacemaking, even if it costs them their own blood, is making change possible.

The poor in spirit. The mourning. The meek. Those who hunger for righteousness. The pure in heart. The merciful. The peacemakers. The persecuted peacemakers. The slandered, insulted and oppressed peacemakers. These are the people of God's world.

The church is where we begin to develop a Christ like character as we work and minister with each other. Living like this is a sign that God's new world is breaking through all around us. The more we focus on living like the people of God's new world, the more we seek to imitate and be like Jesus, the more likely this present world will start to look beyond races and borders and toward a brand-new way of life! Amen.

