

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

*<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*<sup>6</sup>“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup>“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup>“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

To comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

Back in the days when I was being trained as a preacher someone suggested that this was my calling – to proclaim the good news of Jesus in such a way that it would comfort those who were beaten down by life and beaten down by the opinions of others and beaten down by a religion that would give its blessing to the powerful and the successful and the honored ones. Comfort the afflicted.

And afflict the comfortable: to proclaim the good news of Jesus in such a way that the song that Mary sang before Jesus birth is echoed in every sermon. Mary sang of God scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting the lowly, sending the rich away empty and filling the hungry with good things. Mary sang of what God would be doing through the child growing in her womb. Jesus would bring comfort to the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Now I do not know how well I have accomplished that calling in the years I have been preaching – it is not up to you or to me to judge – God will judge. But I do know that when Jesus’ word enters my ears and makes it into my heart I know how often I have been afflicted in my comfort and comforted in my affliction.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.” A word of comfort? Not to me. I know that I want God’s mercy but I am not always merciful with those who do not measure up to my standards. I will help out once or twice but after a while I want them to earn my help by helping themselves. After a while I want to move from mercy to merit. Now if God adopted my attitude I would have pumped the well of God’s mercy dry a long time ago. But Jesus says, “Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.” And later he says that the judgement we pronounce is the judgement we will get.

“Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” Never in my wildest dreams have I imagined that this blessing could belong to me because I was pure in heart.

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.” Monday I took a tour of the runaway teenage shelter run by Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry. The woman who is in charge trains people in diffusing potentially violent situations. I asked her to tell me something she teaches. “When someone is out of control and their voice rises, the one intervening needs to speak more softly.” Interesting. Later on Monday I went to the men’s shelter run by LMM at 2100 Lakeside in Cleveland. When LMM took over the shelter police calls were commonplace as more than 300 per night were given a place to sleep. The police encouraged LMM to hire off duty policemen as armed guards. Instead LMM hired unarmed men and the woman I had talked with at the teenage shelter trained them in nonviolent restraint and intervention. The police do not make many visits to 2100 Lakeside any more.

I realized as I heard this that I would not have had the courage to choose unarmed guards but the peacemakers at LMM did. They let Jesus lead them in this rather than putting their trust in carrying a bigger stick.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It has never happened to me. I have never suffered persecution for standing with the bullied ones. I have encouraged young children to befriend the picked-on ones – the different ones – knowing that when you stand with the outcast you will be outcast, too. But I have played it safe – Jesus promises no blessing for playing it safe.

Now usually I do all my beatitude preaching on the first four beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” These are the afflicted ones – the mother whose sadness over the death of a child sucks the joy right out of life. These are young girls caught in war hiding in the jungle while the cries of family members being hacked to death with a machete fill their ears. These are the children with an explosive unpredictable father whose violence can erupt at any moment. No spirit left, poor in spirit. Not a speck of joy, just tears and sadness – those who mourn. No power to fight back, meek. Longing for some justice from God – hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Jesus says that theirs is the kingdom of heaven, they will be comforted, they will inherit the earth, they will be filled. I have never been one of them – I hope I will never see a day when I am. But I know that Jesus holds them in his heart.

Will Jesus word change you and me this day? Will his word be great enough in us to make us merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, those who stand up against injustice? Could Jesus word be that powerful in you and in me?