

# WHO'S LAUGHING NOW?

Sermon, January 30, 2011

Texts: Matthew 5:1-12; I Corinthians 1:18-31

Nineteenth century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard was born in 1813 and died in 1855. For one who only lived to be 42, he had a remarkable impact on the world of philosophy and theology. Considered to be the father of modern existentialism (*which I won't pretend to fully understand; I just know it has .to do with the philosophy of the experience of existence*), much of his philosophical work dealt with issues of how one exists, how one lives as a sole, free and independent individual. He gave priority to concrete and practical human reality over abstract thinking, and stressed the importance of personal choice and responsibility and commitment and action. A couple of select Kierkegaardian quotes:

"Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."

"There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn't true; the other is to refuse to believe what is true."

"The most common form of despair is not being who you are."

"Boredom is the root of all evil – [it is] the despairing refusal to be oneself."

"People understand me so poorly that they don't even understand my complaint about them not understanding me." (*It's understandable why some people understood him so poorly ... try to understand the next quote:*)

"The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but that the relation relates itself to its own self." (*Got that?*)

Two more: This next one is a bit lengthy, but it's perhaps my favorite (*emphases mine*):

"The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. **We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly.** Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. 'My God,' you will say, 'if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the world?' Herein lies the real place of Christian scholarship. **Christian scholarship is the Church's prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible,** to ensure that we can continue to be good Christians without the Bible coming too close. Oh, priceless scholarship, what would we do without you? Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God. Yes, it is even dreadful to be alone with the New Testament."

Finally, the main Kierkegaardian quote for the sermon this morning:

"Why did I hear no one laugh? Were you not listening?"

He said that at a Sunday afternoon dinner after he had read the beatitudes in church that morning. In other words, he asked, "How can you listen to the beatitudes and not laugh? It must be because you weren't really listening." Overfamiliarity with the scripture can do that do us sometimes. We get so used to the words that we fail to see the irony or humor original hearers would have certainly discerned. I remember with fondness my late father-in-law good-naturedly guffawing during worship with us one Pentecost Sunday; he was here for Stephen's confirmation. In our responsive reading from Acts 2, we read v. 13, "Some, however, made fun of [the disciples] and said, 'They have had too much wine.'" Charlie burst out laughing at Peter's response, when Peter said (v 15), "Let me explain this to you ... these men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!" That IS a funny retort of Peter, but many of us are so used to hearing that in the stained-glass voice of the somber worship service that we miss the humor.

"How can you listen to the beatitudes and not laugh?" wondered Kierkegaard. After all, what is blessed or fortunate about being poor, about grieving, or about being as meek as a mouse? Don't we really consider such conditions a something of a curse? What blessing is there in hungering and thirsting after righteousness; how can a famine or a drought of righteousness be called good? Where is the blessing in being merciful or a peacemaker, especially in this world? Are not the merciful thought of as pushovers, easy marks, and peacemakers as starry-eyed dreamers who have no sense of reality about them? And the pure in heart, aren't they just a bothersome lot of idealist Puritan party-poopers with their single minded devotion? And how can you call it a blessing for being unjustly persecuted for righteousness sake? We may pity the persecuted, perhaps even praise the persecuted, but to call it a blessing, to rejoice and be glad when they or we are wrongly persecuted? How can anyone say or read or hear such things and keep a straight face?

What does He mean, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit..?*" We don't want to be poor in anything! "*Blessed are those who mourn...*" At first glance, that sentiment seems insensitive at best and cruel at worst, especially to someone who has suffered loss ... frankly, I'd consider it a blessing to NOT have to had mourn. In fact, I was preparing for a funeral service at the same time I was finishing this sermon; the funeral this afternoon for Joyce Riccitelli's husband who tragically and unexpectedly died this past Thursday. "*Blessed are the meek...*" The truth of the matter is most of us would probably do well to get some assertiveness training; we let ourselves get walked over or shut up or otherwise intimidated far too often! "*Blessed are the peacemakers...*" Not only is the work of peacemaking hard, frustrating, and often futile, but frequently it leads to you being called overly idealistic, unrealistic, and often becoming the focal point of the other parties' anger. Try being a true peacemaker; you will soon know first hand what being persecuted for righteousness' sake is all about! No wonder Kierkegaard expected laughter; hearing none, he assumed either no one was listening, or they had all dropped into that pious fog glazing over the intellect whenever "religious words" are being read.

Don't worry; I'm speaking partially with my tongue in my cheek. The full text of these beatitudes is remarkably encouraging, insightful, comforting, edifying, inspiring ... but the initial listeners just had to be startled. "Say what?!" These "blesseds" run so starkly counter to prevailing worldly wisdom.

The background for the Beatitudes is that Jesus is being followed by huge crowds ... according to Matthew 4:23, crowds who bring "*every disease and every sickness among the people.*" These are crowds of people whose lives are coming apart, crowds of people who don't have it all together, crowds of people who are seeking direction, crowds of people who are seeking blessing and/or healing. Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up to this small mountain; a hillside by the lake, really. There, with His disciples sitting in the front "pew," He begins the long and fascinating Sermon on the Mount, summarizing what the Kingdom of heaven is really all about, explaining how things are designed to "work" in this Kingdom, and giving divine directions about how life was designed to fit together ... directions, by the way, that are really, really different from the world's directions. The Sermon on the Mount is introduced with the Beatitudes, which comes from the Latin *beatus*, "blessed." Or, as one preacher put it, these are the "Be" Attitudes, as in, "If you want to be blessed, this is the way you ought to Be! These are the attitudes you ought to have!" But to be clear, these are not spoken by Jesus in the language of exhortation or demand. Jesus is not saying "*You ought to be poor in spirit*" or "*Be meek, will ya?!*" None of Jesus' language here is in the imperative ... these aren't commands; they are statements of fact. But we are not going to understand it all at first, because it all seems to be so counter to what we experience in the real world about us. We have to trust that "... the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." (I Cor 1:25)

That's why Jesus begins with the very first beatitude (*and the only one we're going to look at this morning*). It is important to read these beatitudes in the order they're written; there is a progression to them. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (*Personally, I prefer the New English Bible translation: "How blessed are those who know their need of God."*) If we would experience blessedness, the first step is to recognize our spiritual poverty. We do that when we honestly admit our present, ongoing and continual spiritual need, when we acknowledge our present, ongoing and continual sinfulness, when we own up to our present, ongoing and continual weaknesses and inconsistencies, when we face up to our present, ongoing and continual selfishness, envy and pride, when we are honest about the present, ongoing and continual fears and struggles and doubts that dog our days. When we admit and confess our poverty of spirit, that's when the door of grace, the door to the Kingdom of Heaven, is opened to us.

Spirituality, by the way, is not something we ever get "good" at. It is, paradoxically, something that we receive only by confessing how bad we are at it. It's one of the humbling paradoxes of the spiritual life that even the greatest saints realize just how profoundly unspiritual they really are; Paul really meant it when he called himself the chief of sinners. This is true for us as individuals and as a church ... the more we start doing things right, the more we realize there is to be done ... it almost like cleaning a house! Last Monday I decided to spend the day housecleaning, and started in the kitchen ... nearly five hours later, I was still in the kitchen. The more I cleaned, the more I found (*to my shame*) just how cruddy things had become! Well, the closer one draws to God, with all His perfection and holiness, the harsher His light seems to shine on our dark failures and shortcomings and the more we realize how we don't measure up even to our own standards, let alone His. Those who are poor in spirit recognize, acknowledge and confess they can't do it on their own. It's humbling to get too close to God; in fact, for this reason the temptation is great to avoid Him altogether. But drawing near is the only path to blessing.

And that's no laughing matter. It is the very first step on the path to genuine blessing.