

“To Be Ripened”

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Ecumenical Sun.*

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

*...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Micah 6:8[RSV]

Let us pray... O God,

What do you require of us? We already know that you want us to do the right things,
to be kind, and not be so full of ourselves.

Help us ‘wherever [we] are on life’s journey’,
and ripen us for the daily tasks before us.

Amen

Three summers ago, I attended a Christian conference called the Wild Goose Festival
in the hills of North Carolina outside of Asheville.

It is beautiful country with rolling, forest-covered mountains
and the location where the festival took place was a campground with
stage areas at either end and a marketplace with booths
like a Renaissance faire except there were
various ministries, seminaries, and bookstores represented.

The Wild Goose Festival was kind of a Chautauqua Woodstock
with lots of things to learn and do.

There were educational programs & creative activities,
all happening throughout the day and I was in my element;
just a great place to meet people –

Oh, in spite of rain and mud half way through the week
and a train that went by my tent twice a day,
one of those times being 3:00 am in the morning!

It was still fun.

One person I happened to meet on a dirt road going somewhere
was James Papile.

We got talking and I learned Jim was the pastor for an Episcopal church
in the DC area and at one point our conversation turned to sabbaticals...

I told him about my hopes to take a sabbatical in the near future
and Jim told me he had taken a sabbatical that was fully funded
by the Lilly Foundation.

We traded phone numbers and e-mail addresses and drifted off to
whatever was the next talk session, musical event, or small group activity.

Willard, p.2

The next summer, I visited Jim on a road trip north after attending the Network of Biblical Storytellers Festival in Washington, DC. He & his wife Kay, graciously welcomed me to their home and I was the guest preacher at his church the next day and did a storytelling presentation after the service.

We had talked the night before about the program I would be reciting to include my paraphrase of the Sermon on the Mount – which begins with the Beatitudes, our Gospel lesson this morning.

The Beatitudes start with blessings – “Blessed are the poor in spirit...”
Now the way I used to tell this story,
was to substitute the word ‘blessed’ with “happy” –
“Happy are the poor in spirit...”

Now, when I told it that way at my hometown church in Plainfield, NJ,
The Rev. Dr. Shelby Rooks happened to be attending.

Dr. Rooks was retired as the Executive Minister
of the UCC Board of Homeland Ministries, and he could be a bit gruff –
like when he greeted me as he exited the Sanctuary,
“To be ‘blessed’ is not always to be “happy”!

Well, after that, I changed the word to “honor” –
“To be honored are those...” and so forth;
and that is the way I have rendered this story until
Jim Papile told me about a conversation he had with someone
who had said the word for ‘blessed’ in the Beatitudes
could also be interpreted in this way...
“To be ripened...”

That means to come to fullness of one’s potential,
to be all that you can be, to be who you are,
and to be blessed, happy, honored, “beatified”, and loved.

That is just the beginning of the Beatitudes –
the “Be” attitudes, the way we should “be” regardless of our circumstances.

Now, there is something else about the Beatitudes –
they seem to follow a pattern that progresses, though cyclic rather than linear,
and the clue for this is that these blessings begin – and end with,
the Beloved Community of God’s Kingdom.

*To be ripened are those who are challenged by poverty and disability,
for theirs is the Beloved Community of Heaven...*
Traditionally, this is about the ‘poor in spirit’ – as in poor and homeless,
but we should also be reminded of those who are mentally ill
and those who are physically disabled.

Willard, p.3

I once told the Beatitudes at a state psychiatric hospital saying,

“To be honored are those who are mentally ill...”

and two of the patients were very grateful to hear that they were worthy of honor, too, and they thanked me afterwards.

To be ripened are those who suffer, for they shall be healed...

To me, ‘Blessed are those who mourn’ implies anyone who suffers and grieves for the loss of someone or even of one’s own freedom like when disease or disability hinder us.

To be ripened are those who are humbled, for they shall win it all in the end...

which is another way of thinking about how, ‘the meek shall inherit the Earth’ - and another sentiment, ‘Sometimes you got to bend, so you don’t break.’

To be ripened are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied...

‘Righteousness’ and ‘justice’ are interchangeable here, though I prefer the word ‘justice’ because it has a broader sense of transforming society while requiring individual righteousness.

To be ripened are those who are merciful, for they shall receive mercy...

just speaks for itself – though that mercy may only realized beyond one’s timeline of this life on Earth.

To be ripened are those who are pure in intention, for they shall see God in action...

and this speaks to the internal decision-making we all have to do in sorting out between the wisdom and foolishness that arise from our hearts; and even when our goals may fail to be achieved, God’s presence can still be recognized in the process.

To be ripened are those who are peace-builders, for they shall be called the children of God...

Unfortunately, ‘peacemakers’ can be also associated with a kind of gun and military ventures, too, sousing the term ‘peace-builders’ helps unpack that image to get at what a person who is dedicated to peace-making seeks to do; and ‘the sons of God’ must necessarily include the daughters as well – so that together, they are ‘the children of God’.

To be ripened are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice for theirs, too, is the Beloved Community of Heaven...

which brings us full circle to the Kingdom...

Willard, p.4

The next verse serves as a mirror to remind us all that

we are on this journey of faith, too, even when it gets rough...

And to be ripened are those of you who will be

cursed, persecuted, and accused of all kinds of terrible things –

falsely on my account,

for the prophets were abused in the same way.

So, we shouldn't be too surprised when we are treated unfairly at times;

It just might mean we are doing the right thing as far as Jesus is concerned –

or we better clean up our act,

because Jesus won't take the blame for bad behavior.

As I said, it has occurred to me that the Beatitudes is not simply

a list of "Be" attitudes, as in the way we should "be".

But that there is something else in that the Beatitudes follow a pattern

that is a progression – like the plotline of a story.

Yet this pattern is repeatable and not simply one way or linear,

and the clue for this is that these blessings begin – and end with,

the Beloved Community of God's Kingdom.

The cyclic path or the story of the Be-attitudes of Christ is

the countermyth to the traditional 'hero's journey' of

"the good guy slays the bad guy and they all live happily ever after".

In Jesus' story,

the servant of God moves through poverty, grief, humiliation,

but then finds resolve for justice, mercy, purity of purpose,

peace building, and perseverance despite persecution

and this continues until the servant is ripened for the harvest

into the Beloved Community of God's Kingdom.

So as we all go through these phases of life as Christians,

we are ripened to become disciples – which is another way of saying,

we become *disciplined*, mature, authentic, true human beings.

In so doing, we fulfill what God requires of us as it says in Micah 6:8^b

to do justice, ...love kindness, and... walk humbly with... God...

so that, hopefully,

we have not become like that Pennsylvania Dutch/German saying,

'too soon oldt und too late schmartd.'

Amen

As we go forth from here, let us all be confident that

'no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey' towards blessing,

you will ripen as you seek to do what is just, to be kind,

and walk humbly with God.

Amen

*Our lesson from Micah 6:1-8 includes a familiar proclamation
about what God requires of us as human beings –
and that sacrifice is not among those requirements...*

¹The LORD said to his people:

Come and present your case
to the hills and mountains.

²Israel, I am bringing charges against you—
I call upon the mountains and the earth's firm foundation
to be my witnesses.

³My people, have I wronged you in any way at all?
Please tell me.

⁴I rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves.
I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to be your leaders.

⁵Don't forget the evil plans of King Balak of Moab
or what Balaam son of Beor said to him.
Remember how I, the LORD, saved you many times
on your way from Acacia to Gilgal.

⁶What offering should I bring when I bow down
to worship the LORD God Most High?
Should I try to please him by sacrificing calves a year old?

⁷Will thousands of sheep or rivers of olive oil
make God satisfied with me?
Should I sacrifice to the LORD my first-born child as payment
for my terrible sins?

⁸The LORD God has told us what is right and what he demands:
"See that justice is done, let mercy be your first concern,
and humbly obey your God."

Let us be challenged & guided by these words...

Matthew 5:1-12

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain,
and when he sat down his disciples came to him.

² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,
for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Inspired by Matthew 5:1=12

WHEN JESUS SAW THE CROWDS , HE WENT UP THE MOUNTAIN;
AND HE SAT DOWN WHEN HIS DISCIPLES HAD CLIMBED UP
AND WERE BEFORE HIM.

AND FROM HIS LIPS, CAME THIS TEACHING:

TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE CHALLENGED
BY POVERTY AND DISABILITY,

FOR THEIRS IS THE BELOVED COMMUNITY OF HEAVEN;

TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO SUFFER,
FOR THEY SHALL BE HEALED;

TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE HUMBLLED,
FOR THEY SHALL WIN IT ALL IN THE END;

TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR JUSTICE,
FOR THEY SHALL BE SATISFIED;

TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE MERCIFUL,
FOR THEY SHALL RECEIVE MERCY;

TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PURE IN INTENTION,
FOR THEY SHALL SEE GOD IN ACTION;

TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PEACE-BUILDERS,
FOR THEY SHALL BE CALLED THE CHILDREN OF GOD;

TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED
FOR THE SAKE OF JUSTICE, FOR THEIRS, TOO,
IS THE BELOVED COMMUNITY OF HEAVEN

AND TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE OF YOU WHO WILL BE
CURSED, PERSECUTED, AND ACCUSED

OF ALL KINDS OF TERRIBLE THINGS –
FALSELY ON MY ACCOUNT,

FOR THE PROPHETS WERE ABUSED IN THE SAME WAY.