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Matthew 5:1-12  
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*The Pursuit of Happiness*

John Dear finished his undergraduate degree at Duke in 1981. John Dear – who probably spent his childhood wishing his parents had come up with a more original name – studied hard and partied harder during his time as a student. On Ash Wednesday, 1980 he had a conversion experience in a worship service here at Duke Chapel, and he went on to become a Jesuit, committed to work for the cause of peace. After he graduated from Duke he went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and there he went to the Sea of Galilee and climbed the Mount of Beatitudes where Jesus is said to have given the Sermon on the Mount. And there he began to read and pray through the text that we heard moments ago. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is how John Dear describes those moments on the Mount of Beatitudes:

“As these familiar words sank in . . . I could see that they were a summary of the gospel . . . the most profound words ever uttered. And then, I suddenly realized, *I think Jesus is serious!* My knees went rubbery, my jaw dropped, and my mouth went dry. I gazed at the panorama before me – the deepness of the sea, the mountains in the distance, the vivid green of the hills. *What does this mean? Is this what I’m called to be – actually and truly? Meek and mournful? Merciful and poor in spirit? To hunger for justice and make peace?*” I had always considered such teachings to be intended for special people, holy people, religious people. Yet here those very words were knocking on the door of my heart.”<sup>1</sup>

The words of today’s gospel lesson are familiar, though I wonder if we can hear them like John Dear heard them, as words knocking at the door of our heart. The familiar translation begins with the word “blessed,” though “blessed” may not best express the fullness of what Jesus means. Scholars have suggested a better translation might be “happy.” “Happy” not in the emotional fleet-footed sense of the word, “happy,” here today and gone tomorrow, but “happy” as a deep sense of contentment and joyfulness. Happy are the merciful. Happy are the pure in heart. Happy are the peacemakers. There is something grammatically odd about the beatitudes. My 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher would have raised her eyebrows at the sentence structure in the way only 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teachers can. Each of the nine beatitudes is a present tense and future tense statement, something that already is and yet also is to come. Happy *are* the meek, for they *will* inherit the earth. Happy *are* the merciful, for they *will* receive mercy. Happy *are* the pure in heart, for they *will* see God. The happiness is now, even as it depends on the future. And yet the happiness described in the beatitudes is not the happiness that we have been taught to pursue by mainstream culture. It is a completely different kind of happiness, a completely different way of viewing and interacting with the world.

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<sup>1</sup> John Dear *A Persistent Peace*, Chicago, Ill: Loyola Press, 2008, pgs. 49-50.

When I was little my brother and I used to challenge one another to see how long we could stand on our heads. Some of you may think that explains quite a lot. We would brace ourselves against one wall or another and use our hands and head as a sort of tripod to stabilize our bodies. You wouldn't believe what happens when you stand on your head. You have a completely different perspective on the world. You see up close the shoes others are wearing. You notice the little spider crawling along the wall, and it looks quite fierce from such a distance. The cat can nuzzle your nose instead of your shin. You feel a bit foolish, a bit out of whack, when standing on your head. Everything that had seemed familiar is now unfamiliar. At the same time it's exciting with the blood rushing and the adrenaline pumping. You feel different than everyone else, like you have a secret that no one else knows. Standing right-side up isn't the only way to go after all. We found standing on our heads to be great fun, and not only because everything looks so different, and when the capillaries start to break you get real dizzy, but because we were doing it together. Standing on my head with my brother was far more fun than standing on my head by myself.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turns the world on its head, and asks us to see the world in a completely new way. He says everything we think we know about what happiness is we have to forget, and instead learn a new meaning for the word happiness. The beatitudes say the opposite of what we expect them to say. They do not say happy are those who are strong. Happy are those who have it all together. Happy are those who are rich and successful and socially mobile. Happy are those who are the smartest and have great jobs. No, in the upside-down logic of the gospel, Jesus turns everything we think we know about happiness around. "Happy are those," Jesus says, "who are overlooked for they will inherit the earth. Happy are those who are pure in heart, for they will see God. Happy are those who are persecuted and reviled, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Jesus is giving this sermon early in his three year public ministry. He is laying out his strategic plan, his Sportscenter top ten plays. The beatitudes are something that Jesus says in the present, and then *becomes* in the future. The beatitudes are about Jesus for in Jesus we see the forgiveness of the past, the happiness of the present, and the hope of the future as one. Jesus is the peacemaker who is the son of God. Jesus is the meek who inherits the earth. Jesus is the pure in heart, in whom the heart of God is revealed. Jesus is the one who is reviled and persecuted for righteousness sake.

All Saints Sunday is a day to give thanks for the past, and the now, even as we look to the future, to remember those who have lived and died in the faith, those who are well known and known only to God, those from every generation, every nation, and every social class, whose happiness is a window into the very heart of God, in whom their own happiness and the happiness of God become one. All Saints Sunday is a day to give thanks for the saints, because the saints are those in whom we encounter the beatitudes. The saints are those in whom we see Jesus.

When we think of "saints" the tendency is to think of famous people in history who have done heroic things for God. I had a friend in divinity school who said

Christians should be barred from talking about people like St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Theresa because we have so deified these figures that they have lost their humanity, and if they lose their humanity then we can no longer be like them, and thus they remain distant from us, and we rob them of their power to shape our lives. One of the great social prophets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dorothy Day, said “Don’t call me a saint. I refuse to be dismissed so easily.” Like John Dear we might imagine that the beatitudes are for the super-religious, the overly pious, the truly saintly, rather than people like you and me.

So on this All Saints Sunday, don’t think of those who would be traditionally thought of as saints. Instead, think about the people in your life, living or dead, in whom the beatitudes became real, who seem to stand on their heads in a right-side-up world, even if it makes them look a bit foolish.

Maybe its somebody you know who is a social misfit, who has trouble putting three sentences together, and is a bit of an embarrassment at cocktail parties, who comes across as a touch naïve most of the time, yet whose heart is so pure that when you are around him, you are overwhelmed with the goodness of his heart, and you sense that he must live very close to God. Maybe it’s someone who exudes kindness and humility, somebody we might even call meek, but not in a doormat sort of way, rather in a way that sees kindness and humility as a way of life, the kind of person you’d love to see inherit the earth, because we could use that sort of kindness and humility in our world just now. Perhaps its somebody who is a fierce advocate for something that Jesus cares about, maybe it’s the plight of the poor, or peacemaking, or loving enemies, and that person is made fun of or ignored because of her stance, and yet she just won’t quit, and you see the fire of God’s passion burning like a raging fire in her life. And you sense that these people are happy, not in that squirrely feeling-centered sort of way, but happy because their lives have meaning and purpose, and when you are around them you wonder why you can’t be a little more like them. That’s what a saint is. A saint is somebody in whom we see Jesus, so that when we become a bit more like them, we are actually becoming a bit more like Jesus.

The Saints are those people who turn the world upside down and in whom the beatitudes are not some set of ideals that we long for, but are a way of life.

I have some good news and bad news. Here’s the bad news. Only the most saintly of people embody all nine of the beatitudes, and for most of us run of the mill disciples, the weightiness of such faith would crush us and so the tendency is not to even try.

Now here’s the good news. We don’t have to embody all of the beatitudes by ourselves. Isn’t that good news? The New Testament never uses the word *saint* in the singular. There are only *saints*, plural. We just welcomed five new saints into the church through baptism, and baptism means that we are in this together, all of us. We’re not solo figures. We’re all a part of the body of Christ. I may not be able to live all of the beatitudes myself, but if I work on one of them, just one of them, and you work on

another, and you over there try to live into another, and you another, well, that's what it means to be the church. That's what it means to be the body of Christ, that together we embody all nine of the beatitudes, and together we look like Jesus, who in his life, death, and resurrection stood the world on its head. So don't worry about all of the beatitudes, just start with one. And if we all make one of them real in the way we live, maybe someone will say, "Hey, something a little weird is going on over there at Duke Chapel these days. All those Christians seem to be standing on their heads!"

What a happy day that would be.