

February 2, 2014 “The Journey is Blessed” Matthew 5:1-12

John Wesley used to say, “believers live in eternity and walk in eternity.” What he meant was this: Even though the world we live in is far from the kin-dom of God, we believers chose to act as if that kin-dom has already come. Now that's pretty foolish. Anyone who lives by God's rules in this world is considered a fool. But by acting as if—not waiting until we get to heaven but living the blessed life here and now—we can bring heaven a little closer to earth for everyone else.

The beatitudes, or blessings, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, give us general guidelines for living the blessed life. Today, I'm going to share with you the way John Wesley understood these 12 verses. It's going to remind a lot of us of the 12 steps of AA. You could say that Wesley makes the Good Book read like the Big Book today.

What's unique about the way Wesley read these verses is that he didn't think of them as just a list of quaint sayings

about the Christian life. For Wesley, this isn't a list; it's a map or a trail guide that Christians can use to hike into the heart of God. Get your water bottle and your backpack and let's get going.

We are taking the first step on the trail and we can't miss this one. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." What did Jesus mean by that? In Luke's gospel, he simply says, "Blessed are the poor." So we have to think about what it means to be poor. What advantage do the poor have over the rich? They can't solve their problems with money, so they don't need a preacher to convince them that they need God. They already know that.

The poor in spirit are those who know themselves well enough to know they need God. Poor or rich, when we decide to take a serious moral inventory, stare into the depths of our souls and check out all the dis-eases festering down there, when we own up to our part in our problems and stop playing

the blame game, we gain a wealth of knowledge about our poverty of spirit. Humbling, isn't it?

But the loss of our pride is the beginning of the blessing. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This is no time for a pity-party. God doesn't want self-flagellation. God wants our transformation. Call this first step "Confession."

On to Step Two. "Blessed are those who mourn." Getting all the bad stuff off our chests, naming the problem so that we can claim the promise, is a liberating experience. It feels so good to finally own up to the truth and discover that we are not disowned by God.

We think we've got it made, but we've got new problems now: How can we live like we're already in heaven, when everything else seems to be going to hell? When we start on the journey to God, one of the first things we discover is how difficult it is to be a healthy soul in a sick family and a sick

society.

This is a time of testing, when the weight of the world hangs heavy on us. This is when we begin to grieve the immensity of the problem. We're not only still living with the consequences of our own sin, but we live with others' determined efforts to keep us in the habits of sin, because it's safer for them that way. It's a dysfunctional system, and they don't want us to escape it. And so we mourn for all the people who are caught up in the mess. But don't despair. God will not disappear. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Call this step "Contrition."

Step Three. "Blessed are the meek." We have confessed our poverty of spirit. We have mourned over our sin and grieved what is going on in our world. Pretty soon we begin to feel powerless over our problems, and that's progress.

Think of Paul sitting in prison when he writes, "I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me." [4:13] There in

his cell, Christ is all he has. Christ is all he needs. So we may be powerless, but we are not hopeless. We are meek. That means having nothing—no power or position, no arrogance or impatience, no anger or resentment—nothing that could get in the way of our having Jesus. And when we have Jesus, we have everything. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Call this step, "Surrender."

Step Four. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." A more contemporary translation would be: "right relationships" or "justice". Those who have surrendered their hankering for power, discover a deeper hunger for justice. They have tasted heaven and want to sit down at the feast. They want the kingdom to COME ON DOWN!

And so they work to bring communities together, to get neighbors to stop being afraid of each other and strangers to start caring for one another. They strive to put an end to poverty, disease and war forever. They are thinking, "If only I

had a hammer."

Pete Seeger had a hunger and a hammer for justice. And when we sang with him, we did, too. Pete died this past week, at the age of 94. But the songs he wrote to bring us together, to get us singing and marching and working together, those songs will keep working on us. And we'd better keep hammering away. Call this step "Obedience."

Step Five. "Blessed are the merciful." Those who are filled with the justice-seeking love of God put no limits on their loving. They live and love by a different set of rules than the rest of the world. Because they believe in the concrete reality of eternity, they make every effort to live there right now. Day by day they work for good. They love even the enemies of God. They model mercy rather than punishment, forgiveness rather than revenge.

Nelson Mandela is our shining example here. But I wonder what a Truth and Reconciliation Commission would look like a

little closer to home. "Janice" had a tough life, and her mother, "Betty," was a real piece of work. When Betty died and I was preparing the memorial service, I heard the awful truth. Betty had physically abused Jan as a child and verbally abused her her whole life. Eventually, Jan learned that her mother had also been a victim of abuse and neglect. It was a sick system and Jan was determined not to perpetuate it. So, she began working on forgiving her mother. It took years and she's still working on it.

When Betty got old and sick, she needed Jan to take care of her. It wasn't easy, but Jan did what she could and arranged for others to do the rest. The morning the old lady died, I was called over to the house and saw Jan crying and stroking her mother's hair, saying, "Mom, I love you." Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Call this step "Reconciliation."

Step Six. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see

God.” If you’ve told the truth, been thoroughly tested, surrendered to the will of God, hungered for the justice of God, and freely shared the mercy of God and you are still on the journey, then step by step you are approaching authenticity. You are touching purity. You are gradually becoming what you were created to be, a visible image of the invisible God.

A pure heart is one that is totally filled up with God. And if all that the heart knows is God, then all that the eye sees is God. For the pure in heart, God is everywhere. They can see God in everything. And everything they see is in God. We’re getting pretty darn close to heaven here. However hellish the world is around us, if we are pure in heart, we can see God working there.

In my experience, it’s been mostly seniors who can see this well. Maybe they can’t read labels anymore, but they can sure read reality. It’s one of the things that gives old age its grace, and it’s something I’m looking forward to: being able to see

God in everything. I hope I get there. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Call this step “Going on to Perfection.”

Step Seven: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” They’re pure in heart. They can see God everywhere in the world, and so they can see possibilities for peace that only God can see. They not only have a peace in their hearts that passes all understanding, but they have the power to make peace in their families, their communities, their country, and their world. The skeptics will say, that’s kid’s stuff, like stuffing roses in shotgun barrels. Only children are foolish enough to think that there’s any point in working for world peace. And that IS the point. Blessed are the peacemakers. They are fools for Christ’s sake, and they will be called children, children of God.

There are some 80 and 90-year-old children of God at the Redwoods Retirement Community in Mill Valley. When the Iraq War broke out, a group of the residents there decided to make

a witness for peace on the street corner. The Mill Valley Seniors for Peace have been out on the sidewalk, sitting in their chairs, holding up signs every Friday afternoon since 2003. Week by week they are getting holier and literally heaven is coming closer. Call this step “Sanctification.”

Steps Eight and Nine: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake...Blessed are you when people revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” When we were kids, the goody-goodies always got a lot of grief. And it doesn’t get much better when you grow up. Become pure and holy and pretty soon you get harassed for it. No good deed goes unpunished, as they say.

For too many Christians in the world today, persecution can mean execution. But Archbishop Tutu spoke the truth for all of us when he said, “The most awful thing that they can do is to kill me, and death is not the worst thing that could happen to a Christian.” Staying alive but giving up hope, losing our

faith, losing our ability to love, our capacity to forgive—that's a fate even worse than death. In this struggle, we carry no weapons. Love is the only way we can win. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Call this step Perseverance.

There you have it. The journey to heaven on earth, what Wesley called "the way of salvation": first confession, contrition, surrender, then obedience, reconciliation, going on to perfection, sanctification, and finally perseverance. As Irenaeus in the third century said: "The steps which lead us to God are not a few." But the promise of Jesus is that the whole way is blessed. What the beatitudes are about is this: that wherever we are on our faith journey, God is with us. So we trust and obey along the way because we know that where God is heaven is. Catherine of Sienna put it like this: "All the way to heaven is heaven." The journey is blessed.