

Beatitudes, UU Style
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When I first think of blessings, I smile at the abundance of them in my life. Some of these blessings can be pretty small— like the smell of iris as they’re blooming madly in my back yard, or my old neighbor guy who leaves a loaf of banana bread he just baked on my front step, just ‘cause. Some blessings are bigger, like a deep and loving friendship or the health of my son. I have found that observing the blessings in my life is a way of bringing me into the present moment and providing a balance to my days. Simply, recognizing the gifts makes the adjacent challenges or sorrows a bit easier.

All of us have, potentially, hundreds of blessings in a day, if we but cultivate the practice of awareness and recognize them. My belief is that if you also have a practice of gratitude for those blessings, more will surely follow.

As I contemplated further, our monthly theme of blessings, I also thought of the Beatitudes as presented by Jesus to his disciples in his Sermon on the Mount. Most of us are likely familiar with these:

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

Blessed are they who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.

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

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

Blessed are the merciful,
for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure of heart,
for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called children of God.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

These eight beatitudes have become a much loved part of the New Testament. Unlike many of the severe “thou shalt nots” of the Old Testament, they are positive declarations of what reward, blessing, can be expected for specific, virtuous behavior.

There are many interpretations of the Beatitudes, such as what does “meek” mean in this context, how do you interpret “poor of spirit”? Tomes have been written about these phrases with some consensus, some variation, but what is consistently understood is that by embodying the virtues as set out by Jesus, one is promised salvation, not in this world, but in the next, the Kingdom of Heaven. The Beatitudes are eschatological—a term that Andy Carlson introduced us to a few months ago in his wonderful sermon about the book of Revelation and the blues. Eschatology, Rebecca Ann Parker writes, is “The theological term for ‘speaking of final things’ and popular forms of Christian eschatology abound: The end of the world will come in a cosmic battle of good and evil, and God will rescue the true believers.” —those who live the beatitudes.

As I was reading about the Beatitudes, I wondered what the heck that word really meant. It comes from the Latin *beatitudinem*, or “state of blessedness,” which comes from *beare* “make happy.” One of the earliest definitions of beatitude was “supreme happiness.” And the word bless or blessing, was an Old English word meaning “to make holy, to give thanks,” which can be traced all the way back to a proto-Germanic word for “blood” because of the practice of sprinkling blood on pagan altars to make them hallow.

Now, you can, like I do, spend way too much time mucking around the Oxford English dictionary learning the history of words and their evolution—and I won’t subject you to all of that—but by tracing the transformation of the word, you can see how the thought behind the concept changes. The mid-11th century English, definition for blessing was “gift from God.” I love the movement from the sprinkling of blood on pagan altars to a gift from God in a few short centuries.

Blessing has evolved to have a secular definition as a gift, not necessarily from god, and continues to have meanings of giving thanks, making holy, a state of utmost bliss, or divine joy. I like that one a lot: Divine Joy, especially if divine is allowed the breadth to include the divinity within myself, the divinity of my community, and the divinity of the great beauty that surrounds me.

I like so much about Jesus’s Beatitudes. I like all of that blessing. I like focusing on the positive—the peacemakers, the pure of heart, the merciful. I like the rhythmic structure of them, and the anaphora—the intentional repetition, like a chant, at the beginning of each sentence—Blessed are, Blessed are, Blessed are.

One of my challenges, with the Beatitudes is that they *are* eschatological; they focus on a promised future rather than on the present. I go back to what I said in opening, “I have found that observing the blessings in my life is a way of bringing me into the present.” While we have to pay a little attention to the future, we all know the benefit of slowing down and growing awareness for the glories of this hour, this day, and this one life. And because, as Elizabeth Barret Browning says, “Earth is crammed with heaven.”

Because as Unitarian Universalists we draw from many sources in our search for meaning, in contribution to the changing concept of blessing, and in the spirit of making things anew, I have written another version of the Beatitudes, “UU Style.” With divine joy and in gratitude, I offer these to you. They focus on valuing each other and the gifts of our lives now. You might appreciate them, disagree with them; you might take time to consider them; perhaps you would like add to them; or better yet, to write your own version of them. But please accept these

beatitudes, or this declaration of blessedness, as my gift to you because I wrote them with all of you firmly in my mind with hope that your life bless each step it takes you into the world.

The Beatitudes

Blessed are the mothers,
for they see in their children's eyes the face of God.

Blessed are the fathers,
for they see in their children's smiles the birth of light and answers to questions never asked.

Blessed are the children,
for *they* shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are the music makers
for they tune what is holy within us.

Blessed are the artists,
for they show us what beauty believes.

Blessed are the poets,
For their words are borne down the bones of our days to edges of joy unknown and waiting.

Blessed are the teachers,
for they encourage us with magical patience and with intelligent creativity to explore and to discover the world around us and the world within us.

Blessed are the fair,
for they not only seek justice, they live justice.

Blessed are the whole-hearted (which can include the broken-hearted),
for when the world asks, "Do you know you are loved? They answer, "Yes."

Blessed are the travelers,
for they know each city, each river, each mountain, each fellow on the road is both mirror and prayer.

Blessed are the gardeners,
for they understand the layers in bounty, the arc of thanksgiving.

Blessed are the scientists,
for they crack open our understanding of the universe, never shy of asking the greater question.

Blessed are the healers,
for they give voice to our wounds, helping us to live in possibility.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they lead us to the kingdom of heaven, on earth.

And finally, Blessed is the beloved community,
for it seeks the truth in love.